

REPETITION IN POSTMODERN FICTION:  
THE WORKS OF KATHY ACKER, DONALD BARTHELME AND DON DELILLO

By

RICHARD ANTHONY DOONER, JR.

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By

Richard Anthony Dooner, Jr.

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Chairman: Dr. Daniel Cottom  
Major Department: English

This study examines the fictions of Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme and Don DeLillo in light of the body of creative and critical practices that have come to be known as "postmodernism." It is motivated by the assumption that any alleged radical break from a dominant cultural perspective in the fictional strategies of a "new" era necessarily involves some degree of reduplication. Thus, exploring what constitutes the postmodern self through fiction unavoidably involves considering the cultural politics of repetition.

This study contends that Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo realize that the seeming unity behind realistic fiction's depiction of the subject has always been a pose. Thus, they see the need to address the self and, almost simultaneously, to readdress it. The first address mimics the realistic



novel's ploy of asserting an unequivocal self; the second re-images that self as a tenuous construct.

In sum, Acker's methodology calls for her narrator's to attempt to embrace, critique, and then explode by excess the cultural roles allotted the female subject within a patriarchy. Barthelme attacks the integrity of the subject as formed within a patriarchal totality by exposing the hidden fragmented nature of the parts that compose that totality. And DeLillo attempts to unravel the syncretic narrative of social and technological progress underlying a postmodern capitalist totality by exposing how that totality actually denies the personal fulfillment that it contends to champion.

## PREFACE

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

For the past two decades, the polemics of postmodernism has dominated the cultural and intellectual scene. Much has been made, for example, of what exactly constitutes postmodern discourse and whether it is a continuation or radical break from modernity (these debates succeeding similar debates concerning attempts to locate and define modernity). I do not pretend to be able to address sufficiently whether a social change large enough to warrant the name of a new age has occurred. However, I am confident that enough of a change has occurred that writers in the last two decades have forged new strategies for intervention in the social sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Yet if there is any truth behind the quotation from Eliot, defining postmodern practices will necessarily involve a retrospective analysis of the modes of knowledge and representation found in the periods generally recognized as preceding it, such as modernism and romanticism. While one could conceivably follow this regress back indefinitely,

a more compelling option is to realize how any alleged radical break from a dominant culture involves some degree of repetition. In other words, defining oneself against a system inevitably will reproduce some qualities of that system. This inevitability is perhaps why the modernists' defiance of consumerist culture, characterized by an insistence on the primacy of the will, led in one loathsome variant to fascism, a politics of total domination.<sup>2</sup> And this is also why postmodern writers need to concern themselves with the cultural politics of repetition.

Perhaps foremost among the issues raised because of the reduplicating power of culture, then, is the question of autonomy. Arguably, autonomy becomes a concern after a protracted transformation period in Europe during which the West came to realize "that society must form its own practices and grounds apart from any external determinants or influences" (PMAC 4). This shift to an internal determination gave rise to two extremes of autonomy: that of the social order, in which the actions of individuals should be tied to the totality; and that of the individual, who is understood to be free only when she chooses her own ends and methods for obtaining them. The result of this shift is the rise of internecine battle grounds as a normative function of culture.

For example, let me paraphrase John McGowan's description of the development of what he calls "autonomous spheres." At some point, individuals find themselves poised

against what they see as a dominant culture and attempt to protect themselves against excessive social control. When these individuals make alliances with those who share common interests, systems within culture develop to protect those interests, and these systems compete with each other. Finally, within these systems individuals come to compete against each other to determine the common interest, re-enacting the large scale battle in miniature.<sup>3</sup> In other words, autonomy leads to inevitable fragmentation, arising from the idea that there can be a common good. This process can be seen historically in the continual movements to restore cultural unity, such as romanticism and modernism.

As I see it, the postmodern turn in this process of repetition is the recognition of the apparatus of the totality, the recognition of the assumptions that make social coherence dependent on fragmentation. Coupled with this awareness comes the insistence, based on the critical scrutiny likely to accompany such an awareness, that the totality, because it must be all inclusive, actually promotes continual reformation and so invites strategies that can radically alter it.

In other words, postmodernism asks us to embrace a paradox, that repetition can be radically altering, in order to disrupt a paradox, that alteration can be radically the same. This paradox returns one to the question of how much control individuals can exert over their destinies. In

effect, the realist cornerstone of concrete reality is gone, replaced by the postmodern fragmentation of shifting sands. And this move is not merely one of theoretical sleight of hand. Postmodern writing's association with the demise of a stable referent for concrete reality has been hastened by sweeping tides of events--global wars, for example--that call to question the stability, especially as it connotes "sanity," that allegedly underlies reality. By virtue of extensive communications media, we have become daily witnesses of the inhumanity of people toward one another that makes "reality" seem unreal, leading many to question the fabric of reality. For example, after accounting one particularly gruesome news story, Philip Roth writes:

And what is the moral of the story? Simply this: that the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.<sup>4</sup>

Roth puzzles over what elusive or non-existent moral foundations mean to the contemporary writer and suggests that literature must address an increasingly "unreal" reality if it is going to contribute to the reality of the subjects within. And, indeed, the literature of the latter half of the twentieth century seems to have made qualitative differences in the assumptions regarding the self and the real. For example, the works of Samuel Beckett, the rise of

the anti-hero in the novel, and the unapologetic infiltration of the author or the absurd into seemingly realistic novels all point to the difficult, even questionable, synthesis of the self into daily society. In other words, in the postmodern novel, selfhood begins as an issue, not an assumption.

The condition of the self as a point of contention underlies my interest in Kathy Acker, Donald Barthelme and Don DeLillo. These writers see the need to address the self and, almost simultaneously, to readdress it. The first address mimics the realistic novel's ploy of establishing a concrete reality by asserting an unequivocal self; the second disrupts the context of that alleged reality by re-imagining the self as a tenuous construct. In effect, postmodern repetition confirms the doubt about the viability of the realistic self and by doing so opens up new ground in which to explore the self as construct.

Simply put, Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo offer readers the postulated self. This self-conscious construct is an appropriate literary heir to the realistic self because it exposes that subject as always having had many forms throughout history, its seeming unity having always been a pose. Change is written into its evolution as a safeguard to ideological stability, as in the quest hero who attempts to restore social unity by advocating a liberating autonomy. The liberated then become unified behind the liberator, re-

inscribing cultural unity by valorizing the notion of a guiding principle. The various types of quest narratives, each aligned to a subsystem of interests, make cultural diversity seem possible, even natural. Yet the individual remains under the yoke of a guiding principle, in whose service he becomes a resolute robot or diaphanous desire for change.

As Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo envision the postmodern world, a new order spurred by changing technology sets the system through which knowledge is gained above the self, threatening its primacy. The integrity of the individual subject is threatened by making it merely a component of a system, and the rationality of the individual is threatened through its complicity in its own dissolution.

To change its ends, the postulated self must travel a radical road towards self-knowledge. For Acker, this means taking flights away from the beaten path of identity. She takes the subject along a course that it is not meant to travel; she deliberately tries to transgress the bounds of the journey through which identity is affirmed. That is why her narrators include murderesses (the Black Tarantula), mad questers (Don Quixote), and females role-playing as historic males (Pier Paolo Pasolini). Finally, she hopes that these continued transgressions can open up a place for an authentic feminine voice in narrative.

Barthelme prefers to beat the path itself. He disrupts the course of the journey to self-realization with his fragmentation bombs. The subjects of his parables, fairy tales, and fables then fall into the holes he creates, conspicuously fracturing their illusions of an integral identity. These holes are plays on the notion of the "whole" narrative, which he believes is never actually whole but always trying to disguise itself as such. Barthelme hopes that by disrupting the whole narrative, he can prevent it from shielding its holes, and so can reshape the subjects formed within that narrative.

DeLillo begins his novels by taking his narrators along a conventional narrative path, but as they travel that path he makes its extreme points come together. His narrators end up going up and down between beginnings and ends (representative of tradition and progress) to the point that their own ends become indeterminable. DeLillo demonstrates that the desires of this indeterminate self are knotted beyond conventional recognition, and he exposes how in this condition it is prey to the strategies of postmodern capitalism. The saving grace for his narrators is that the confused subject finds the mode of questioning to be more natural than that of complacency, and DeLillo's narrators ultimately question the politics of the paths they travel.

Of course, if Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo have thrown their characters "off course," the question remains: where



did they go? What in the fragmented world shapes their identity? The popular image of the realist subject has it standing in a unified world, one with philosophical or religious certitudes. When these certitudes were threatened, it fought to reclaim them, insisting not so much on a particular version of truth but on the form in general. Since the breakdown of the postmodern self is accompanied by the breakdown of the moral certitudes suggested by philosophy and religion, Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo anticipate what replaces these certitudes.

In effect, all three of them see the emergence of a more subtle form of totality. For Acker and Barthelme, this totality is patriarchy. The primacy of patriarchy in western cultural history makes "subtle" an unusual term to describe it. But Acker and Barthelme see patriarchy not as a principle in and of itself but as an attachment to systems that perpetuate principles. In this way, they see patriarchy as aligned with natural reason and common knowledge at all historic moments, even as the political and social climates change. Patriarchy never allows itself to be reduced to the advocacy of specific rational, political or spiritual positions and so becomes the image for reclaiming unity when these systems reach a crisis.

For DeLillo, the totality is capitalism. David Bell, the narrator of DeLillo's first novel, Americana, grows up the son of an advertising legend; Bell's entire childhood is

a lesson in marketing strategies. These markets and strategies remain a dominant image throughout DeLillo's texts: for example, the characters in Great Jones Street are always in pursuit of "the product," and much of the action in Players occurs on Wall Street. The extent to which DeLillo implicates capitalism as a detriment to actual personal autonomy increases as his work continues, until in White Noise advertising is quite literally in the background everywhere, distorting the actions and interactions of all its characters.

The growth of capitalism into a monolith is historically easier to chart than the growth of patriarchy. Its rise between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries breaks down the popular nostalgic narrative of traditional communities, based on religious devotion and family interaction, and replaces it with a narrative based on economic values. In other words, economic desire is substituted for traditional truth, hunger for satiation. However, capitalism is not antithetical to traditional ideas of community. McGowan describes how capitalism separates the economic sphere from both the public and private spheres, the fields of agency. It is dependent on these domains, but faces different criteria for success than religion or philosophy. Capitalism need not explain itself nor human worth; it needs only to supply a stable framework

in which daily life can continue. It has only to produce and not to disrupt, and so it comes to be seen as natural.<sup>5</sup>

Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo all attempt to disrupt the totalities they see. Each rejects the narrative of natural order and rationality in which that totality is formed, especially as that narrative insists upon the evolution of social and technological progress. For example, in Great Expectations, Acker disrupts romantic expectations, her most visible strategy being to break down the time lines she provides to frame the novel's action. In the same vein, Barthelme attempts to kill off the lineage of the Dead Father and DeLillo unravels the history of math, a system he sees as paradigmatic of progress.

These disruptions leave behind a residue. Acker and Barthelme find that they carry this residue over in the violent and imperialistic strategies they appropriate from patriarchal history. DeLillo finds himself mimicking the cunning rationality of postmodern capitalism as he attempts to sell to his readers a new postmodern self.

Thus, Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo all come to reject totalizing critiques of culture. In their later works, they strive instead to re-articulate the self through decidedly limited strategies. This re-articulation involves an acceptance of a nightmare unified world, and in Acker's Empire of the Senseless, Barthelme's The King, and DeLillo's White Noise, such worlds provide the daily reality of the

protagonists. Within these worlds, as vast and technologically complex as the postmodern condition suggests, the protagonists seek ruptures in the totality that will allow an institutionally sanctioned home for ideas designed to disturb the monolithic structure. In Don Quixote and Empire of the Senseless Acker creates narrators who are questers, seeking a legitimized position in the narrative of mythic logic. In The King, Barthelme violates Arthurian myth, hoping to tamper with the overdetermined history suggested by the prophecy of Merlin. And in White Noise, DeLillo re-markets consumer mystery in an attempt to replace the "reality" of protracted longing inspired by postmodern capitalism with a satiating "fiction" that turns longing into critique. These attempts fall in line with a postmodern denial of the ability of any critique to liberate fully because of the decentered, fragmented, and plural nature of the contemporary world--a "nature," of course, that critics of postmodernism would describe as "specious," "irrational" and "nihilistic."

In general, Acker's methodology calls for her narrators to attempt to embrace, critique, and then to explode by excess the cultural roles allotted women within a patriarchy. I call this strategy "plagiarism" because Acker seizes narratives that depict femininity and claims them for her own, violating a law to challenge a system of laws. Since Acker sees patriarchy as firmly entrenched, she

repeats her plagiarisms both within a single text and from text to text. And because she sees patriarchy as expansive, she conducts her plagiarism on multiple sites and undertakes multiple journeys.

Barthelme attacks patriarchal systems by exposing the hidden fragmented nature of the parts that compose them. His writings break apart the textual history of patriarchy--its myths, fairy tales, and fables--and insinuate that there is a more plausible, less oppressive, way of rearranging the resultant fragments. In his later works, Barthelme is especially concerned about re-appropriation, the possibility that patriarchy always already anticipates its need to be reformed. Thus, his works demonstrate a growing fear of the monologic, and perhaps a deference to it that constrains his ambitions toward seeing patriarchy moderated or, as he writes in The Dead Father, "turned down."

In Americana, DeLillo explores the possibility of spiritual transcendence. He exposes this romantic view as bound up in the distinctly mundane ideas of progress and correction. When he shifts his attentions to the impossibility of transcendence, he mimics a strict scientific realism that allegedly opposes spirituality and exposes it as complicit with romanticism in perpetuating the guiding principle of rationality in culture. He finds in the union of the romantic and the rational a launching point for modern capitalism, especially in the way it enables a

selective marketing of the technologies that come to pass as progress. In his later works, DeLillo attempts to unravel this syncretic narrative of progress at the same time that he feeds back to that narrative a "fiction" that combats the mysterious way capitalism advocates both progress and lack of fulfillment.

At one point in their bodies of writing, Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo all question the success literature can achieve by adopting and adapting strategies of radical political critique. As an alternative, they turn to the importance of "fictions" for combatting a monolith that is real, if it is real at all, only because of its ability to perpetuate fictions about the stability of its foundations. Acker, Barthelme and DeLillo suggest that if life seems unreal, then in the unreal we may find more plausible models for life.

### Notes

1. Here, I am paraphrasing John McGowan's description of modernity in Postmodernism and Its Critics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, hereafter cited in the text as PMAC), 4.

2. See Frank Kermode's discussion of the parallels between modernist writing and fascist mythology in The Sense of an Ending (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

3. This history is provided in the first chapter of Postmodernism and Its Critics.

4. Quoted by Marguerite Alexander in Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodern British and American Fiction (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) 21.

5. McGowan's description appears in Postmodernism and Its Critics, 14.

## CHAPTER ONE

### "HISTORY'S OPPOSITE": KATHY ACKER'S PLAGIARISM

Not as oneself did one find rest ever  
--Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

In order to proceed with an examination of the legal anatomy of plagiarism, K.R. St. Onge finds it necessary to define the purpose of language: "It is the process by which humans develop a model of their universe in their heads [emphasis St. Onge]. The concurrent purpose is that the model allows manipulating that universe symbolically."<sup>1</sup> Kathy Acker considers plagiarism in legal terms as well, at least to the extent that law anticipates transgression. Acker's plagiarism can be seen as a response to the "symbolic manipulation" of language she has witnessed. Acker sees this manipulation occurring in line with the most dire implications of the term and thus leaving one no recourse outside of a lex taleonus model of transgression. From Acker's perspective, the "use" of language has produced a hegemonic model of the world in which one patriarchal paradigm replaces another and by doing so inscribes and glorifies western theology, philosophy, and capitalism while marginalizing the voices of difference, historically those of women and minorities. Throughout her works, Acker tries



to use narrative against itself, to question, challenge, complicate and disrupt the way previous discourses have manipulated the model of the universe. Her strategy relies upon complex applications of "plagiarism" to various source texts; plagiarism becomes an important image of the text, both exposing the myth of the original text (and of origins in general) and foregrounding the violations necessary for that myth to come to be represented as such.

Acker counts on the assumption that plagiarism is recognized as a part of culture and yet not really a part--rather, an anti-part, a crime or violation. She can make this assumption work for her because when she plagiarizes a source text, her art calls forth the contradictions within the distinctions between original and plagiarized. Thus, to borrow an image used by Jacques Derrida in "Choreographies," plagiarism can dance around the rule in the text it recognizes.<sup>2</sup> For Derrida, the image of the "dance" is that of a constant reconfiguring between two positions of writing. For Acker, these positions are the normalizing, proper sense of writing culture, and the disruptive transgressive, sense of writing or thinking difference. By calling upon both, Acker hopes to force the reader into reconciling the plagiarism to the text and thus into recognizing the function of the transgressive within culture.

Acker's use of a common source text works to prevent a facile dismissal of her plagiarized text as unrecognizable,

seemingly out of culture; at the same time, her complex use of plagiarism works to prevent her plagiarized text from being too easily appropriated, becoming a bastion of culture. She critiques the integuments of culture with a plagiarism layered within itself, resulting in manifold plagiarisms of both popular and obscure, simple and recondite texts--and also in layered plagiarisms of her own writing. In fact, these latter plagiarisms, "authorial violations," sum up what her texts suggest about all discourse: that because culture can accommodate any discourse, it is only in the way a discourse violates a seemingly "given" culture that it becomes identifiable.

In fact, it is the way a discourse violates a given culture that determines how identity is recognized. Acker sees identity as having always been informed by a climate of violence. She attempts to take that violence and redirect it through various plagiarisms, both "literal"--she frequently lifts actual texts--and "figurative"--she just as often lifts textual and cultural practices. Consequently, this distinction between the literal and the figurative is itself transgressed.

Throughout her corpus this practice of plagiarism evolves. At first she uses plagiarism to help her locate identity formations within a culture. When this focus shows identities to be radically flawed, she shifts her attention to cultural institutions and how they inform identity,

applying her plagiarism to those institutions and their practices in an attempt to "unlearn" identity. And now, in her most recent efforts, she has switched from deconstructing identity to relearning it. Broadly speaking, then, Acker's texts can be seen as attempts to locate, unlearn, and relearn practices that inform identity.

Typically, Acker measures her textual success against a historical reality that she sees as "mythic," and that she criticizes by emphasizing its contingent nature and undermining its relation to "truth." In fact, her novels often rely on mimicking the logical discovery of truth. As her narrators move through her narratives, they "discover" a possible truth that might help them find a more authentic identity. At this point, however, the novels test the viability of that solution, and of logic, as they play out their own versions of narrative truth. It is in this testing that her "plagiarism" is at its most complex.

In playing out their versions of narrative truth, Acker's narratives struggle to unlearn mythic truth. Hence, Acker sees recognizing the operation of cultural myths as essential for initiating cultural change. As Acker sees it, the problem is that modern cultures do not recognize their own relation to myth. For example, Claude Levi-Strauss observes that myth is related to questions of a culture's origins, yet in modern cultures divorced from its day to day

operations. To illustrate this degeneration, he uses certain myths on the origin of constellations:

Now something irreversible occurs as the same narrative substance is being subjected to this series of operations: like laundry being twisted and retwisted by the washerwoman to wring out the water, the mythic substance allows its internal principles of organization to seep away. Its structural content is diminished. Whereas at the beginning the transformations were vigorous, by the end they have become quite feeble. The phenomenon was already apparent in the transition from the real to the symbolic, and then to the imaginary, and it is now manifest in two further ways: the sociological, astronomical and anatomical codes, which before functioned visibly, are now reduced to a state of latency; and the structure deteriorates into seriality. The deterioration begins when oppositional structures give way to reduplicatory structures: the successive episodes all follow the same pattern. And the deterioration ends at the point where duplication replaces structure. Being itself no more than the form of a form, it echoes the last murmur of expiring structure. The myth, having nothing more to say, or very little, can only continue by dint of self-repetition.<sup>3</sup>

According to Levi-Strauss, myths do not die out--they only lose an internal logic meaningful to a particular culture. As a matter of fact, Levi-Strauss claims that by the process of appropriating other myths, myths extend. It is at this point in the modern culture that we become alienated from the meaning of the myth as we appreciate its ever-changing form. In effect, by recognizing its transformation, we are reminded of our own evolution. Thus, the primacy we give to the rational order that has replaced the mythic order and helped us see the myth for what it "really" is, a story, is still somehow derived from myth.

Yet Levi-Strauss also contends that there is an "underlying coherence" often concealed behind the "complexity" (Levi-Strauss 129) of the extending myth. Acker sees this coherence when she observes an unbroken succession of patriarchal paradigms presiding over western culture. This succession, born out of the structure of myth, now justifies itself in the logic of rationality. Acker sees it as continuing as long as we reject the significance of mythic structure. She sees the rejection of mythic importance as the key to maintaining control over cultural systems of representation. Thus, she wants to expose the rejection of myth for rational structure as a myth itself, one that represses identity, especially female identity.

Acker's strategy for this exposition is plagiarism. In a legal sense, plagiarism is a crime that attempts to cover up a violation. This violation denies repetition: it attempts to pass as new a text that is already situated within a culture. This cover-up is what Acker sees cultures themselves doing on a larger scale, especially through their textual histories. These documents that seem to reflect cultural change, and, in a western teleological sense, cultural growth, Acker sees as covering up the repetition of oppressive dogma. My use of the term "plagiarism" will frequently encompass practices that can more particularly be described as "burlesque," "satire," "revision," and "irony."

However, to Acker, it is important not to rely on these terms as culturally understood, because they are understood as parts of textual history. For example, a satirist, like Moliere, is frequently appreciated because he is seen as writing from a clearly defined corrective perspective.<sup>4</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that, more recently, Donald Barthelme, a writer noted for his irony, has been criticized for his lack of a centering perspective, and in one critic's words "waives the right to be taken seriously."<sup>5</sup> Since terms such as "satire" and "irony" are critically routine, to Acker they are complicit in myth-making. Thus, I suggest that Acker attempts to "plagiarize" such terms as she "plagiarizes" an entire meaning-making monolith that has been suppressing its own interest in rational succession.

### Plagiarizing Sources

Up through Blood and Guts in High School, Acker concentrates her use of plagiarism on helping her to stake out an area for identity in a non-linear world. She describes the process around creating her first published novel, 1973's The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula, as relying on "the idea that you don't need to have a central identity, that a split identity [is] a more viable way in the world."<sup>6</sup> Her use of the word "viable" suggests a political dimension to her works. Thus,

it is useful to point out that Acker's narrative style, which constantly changes narrators and defers narrative authority, is a response to theoretical work becoming popular at the time, such as Jacques Derrida's work on the decentered self and deferral of meaning and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of language and subjectivity.

However, concurrent feminist studies, such as Kate Millet's Sexual Politics and, later, Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology, which focus on practice more than theory, and attack theory as a masculine discourse contributing to feminine oppression, also inform Acker's writing and color the area she stakes out for identity examinations in a distinctly feminist hue. Thus, Acker's narratives are aware not only of the problems of subjectivity, but also of the problems inflicted on the historical female subject.

One might say that Acker begins writing at a time when she finds one problem imbedded in another--the question of female identity located inside the question of identity as a whole--and investigates them in kind--by imbedding other narratives in her own. This broad schema is the germ of Acker's plagiaristic strategy. Within it, the post-structural influence is played out as the narratives constantly uncenter themselves, always running into the trace elements of previous narratives that have informed them and deferring to narratives that succeed them before they reach closure. The feminist influence is developed in

both the flickering selection of narrators Acker adopts and the markedly excessive narrative style she employs. When the narrator of The Black Tarantula explains that she must "redo"<sup>7</sup> herself, she points to the heart of Acker's early plagiaristic strategy, which is to redo the self in such a way that it can resist forces of patriarchal hegemony and adapt to forces of decentered subjecthood.

I have stated above that Acker uses plagiarism to locate identity, and, more particularly, female identity, in a non-linear world. This is not to say that she asserts the primacy of subjectivity in interpreting "reality" and, accordingly, insists on locating female subjecthood's rightful spot within such an interpretation. Rather, Acker acknowledges that the female subject is, like any subject, a construct--but, in the case of the female subject, a construct historically on the subordinate end of a patriarchal social structure. Thus, all her novels attempt to shuffle the social forces and institutional practices within a patriarchal social structure that shape identity, with a particular emphasis on the possibilities for change such a shuffling offers for the female subject.

Such an undertaking is not new. Alice Jardine has observed that with a slightly different emphasis than Acker's, the re-rendering of the female subject has been the connecting thread through modernity.<sup>8</sup> If so, then what Acker does is simply carry on in the tradition of the



"putting into discourse of 'woman'" (Jardine 33). And if this tradition has its genesis in modernity, it has reached maturity in postmodernity. Both in creative and critical writing, if we care to hold to these distinctions, writing "woman" has become an important consideration, one that spans both theoretical and pragmatic criticism and includes both male and female writers. Even today, critical terms frequently conflate women and writing. For example, Mary Daly rewrites "chrone-ology," Jacques Derrida speaks of "invagination," and Hélène Cixous explores the possibilities of écriture féminine.<sup>9</sup> On the creative side, from Monique Wittig's Les Guerillères to the erotic poetry of Audre Lourde, female identity is the issue and the woman's body is the map on which it is explored. The notion of remapping identity is prevalent in rethinking woman.<sup>10</sup> The importance of Acker as author/cartographer lies in how she reaches for little examined areas of the map, taboo and transgressive places of sexuality, and attempts to incorporate them into the discourse of female identity.

This concentration on the transgressive quality of the feminine is consistent throughout Acker's work. In The Black Tarantula, borrowing from Jean G  net, she describes it as the "love of lonely criminals and thieves" (BT 40); in other words, a love of the identity forced to live (and, if possible, thrive) on the political margins of society. Acker's alignment of female identity with the transgressive

places her texts within the designation of the "avant-garde" and gives them a considerable historical background.

Susan Suleiman points out that avant-garde movements in western art can be traced back at least as far as romanticism, reaching a particularly full elaboration this century in the Surrealist movement.<sup>11</sup> She provides a cogent explanation of their purpose:

The hallmark of these movements was a collective project (more or less explicitly defined and often shifting over time) that linked artistic experimentation and a critique of bourgeois thought and desire for social change, so that the activity of writing could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural, and political arena. (Suleiman 12)

Suleiman's synopsis agrees favorably with a line from André Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism" in which he suggests that future surrealist evolution is secondary to contemporary surrealist impact: "Far more serious, in my opinion--I have intimated it often enough--are the applications of Surrealism to action."<sup>12</sup> For Breton, such actions involve the domains of theater, philosophy, science and criticism, to name a few, to the extent that eventually "a new morality must be substituted for the prevailing morality, the source of all our trial and tribulations" (Breton 44). Acker assumes a similar posture in defending her own "experimental" fiction. Prefacing a discussion of her works in Review of Contemporary Fiction, she argues that attacks against experimental literature exist "because our society, through the voice of its literary society, cannot bear

immediacy, the truth, especially the political truth."<sup>13</sup>

Acker's equivalent of Breton's new morality is to take and reshape representations of identity from the repressive voices of literary society: "by using each other, each other's texts, we keep on living imagining, making, fucking, and we fight this society of death" (Notes 31).

This similarity in approach leads to a similarity in subject matter. Erotica, violence and sadism dominate both the surrealists' and Acker's depiction of the world. The difference between their positions might best be described as one of choice--the surrealists sought out and embraced the margins of a patronizing political society as the most effective position from which to conduct their critique, while Acker sees herself as having been pushed to those margins by a hostile political community. Thus, Acker sees her sex as victimized by the historical application of the approach she adopts for redress. One can follow her reasoning by examining the use of female subjects by surrealist artists, themselves almost exclusively male, in their works. Suleiman argues that only the artists themselves are subjects, subjects who obsessively employ the female as object of their work in their attempts to alter representations of their subjectivity. These "uses" of the female as object are a violence against her of form and content. They help constitute the political community Acker encounters, where one is given only a male subjectivity to

explore. Hence, in a reversal of the surrealist process, Acker begins with the female object and does her violence, in the hope of altering her subjectivity.

Acker treats the romance novel form of the late nineteenth-century novel with the same combination of reverence and disdain with which she treats the avant-garde. Perhaps this is due to her identification of creativity with a bourgeois ideology that "made a capitalistic marketplace for books" (Notes 33). It displaced the politics of creativity at least ostensibly designed by the romantic poets to rebel against a stagnating, logical society. Acker sees this rebellion as co-opted, normalized, and turned into the production of the very images of society that have made her rebellion necessary. Hence, part of Acker's desire for rebellion aligns her with the forces she sees as oppressing her. Her "fucking" with a source text is also a "making love" to that text, to the extent that she desires to use it to breed change and, in fact, must use it to do so.<sup>14</sup> However, it is also a threat to the source text, since by using it she hopes to eradicate its power.

Similarly, from the romanticism displaced by the rise of the novel, Acker draws a model for her transgression. She sees romantic rebellion as having aligned transgression with cultural transcendence. Acker works to fulfill that identification--but in the hope that by doing so, she will make it unrecognizable. Thus, her first heroines are

"Murderesses" who, after killing off their oppressors, must kill off their own identification as murderesses. This process of erasure and self-erasure becomes especially prominent in Great Expectations and the books that follow it. With romanticism as with Surrealism, then, Acker's relation to her literary sources is highly ambivalent. Her texts are both akin and a kick to their historical sources.

Acker is similarly ambivalent about her critical influences. In them she sees a binary split between practice and theory that is historically real, in that scholars recognize it, but politically false, in that it naturalizes what she considers to be a cultural and political construction. Arleen Dallery, for example, sees such a split when she argues about the differences between American and French feminisms. American feminism, she notes, rooted in behavior, seeks to "reconstruct the everyday life of women," while French feminism, rooted in a philosophical, linguistic, and psychoanalytic tradition, believes that "a new woman's writing of discourse is necessary to retrieve the repression of feminine unconscious in western discourse and models of subjectivity."<sup>15</sup> The difference is practical and theoretical, and Acker works both but embraces neither. She sees the split as an organizing scheme symptomatic of the very oppression she fights. Hence, Acker employs various everyday lives to rework a discourse of subjectivity; she attempts to write a

new woman who can withstand a husband's conscious masculine violence before retrieving her own feminine unconscious. Her novels depict lives that are representations of a discourse that posits a "body" that is realized only in terms of phallocentric codes--but that receives pain that is nothing like a disembodied code.

In this way, Acker rejects binaries while conceding that the issues suggested by terms such as "practical" and "theoretical" are valid. Thus, in Acker's view, critical discourse is not divorced from responsibility for contributing to the problems it addresses. Therefore, Acker treats it very much as she treats her literary sources. Part of the purpose of using it is to change it. And so Acker's use of criticism and critical theory is frequently fast and easy, in order to knock it off its perch, and then imprecise, or out of context, in order to change it. Regardless of what form it takes, the history that comes to her must change, just as she realizes the history she hopes to recreate will also be bound to change.

### Plagiarizing Self

It is difficult to provide a summary of any of Acker's novels. Their consistencies have less to do with plot continuity than with continuity of style and motif. For example, the synopsis of The Childlike life of the Black Tarantula on the back cover of Portrait of an Eye, a reissue

of Acker's first three novels, describes the novel as consisting of a "brash and sexy female voice" that "steps into the biography of a Mississippi murderess who falls in love with a famous lawyer." This is true, as far as it goes. But it excludes the half-dozen other murderesses Acker's voice speaks, not to mention the ostensibly masculine voices of Alexander Trocchi and William Butler Yeats. It would be more beneficial to provide a synopsis of The Black Tarantula's strategies, strategies re-employed throughout her work on identity.

Acker's first strategy of individual plagiarism involves the link of femininity and the female subject to violence. She makes this link the nexus of her work in her very first published novel. The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula begins with an account of "some lives of murderesses" (BT 3). The Black Tarantula states her purpose as to "become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses" (BT 2). This purpose serves a dual function: it links the idea of violence to a burgeoning notion of female identity, and suggests that part of the threat of this identity, part of the violence, occurs on the semiotic plane. Plagiarism, then, described above as the repeating of words that results in one's becoming a "murderess," operates as a conduit between the developing, "childlike" life of the Black Tarantula, as she enters into the metaphorically violent world of language, and the world

of the female subject, as she enters into the historically violent world of subjecthood. During this process a metaphoric murder occurs, the murder of the "pure" female subject and of "pure" language. Thus, the "childlike" life of the Black Tarantula loses its innocence (if it ever had any) and enters into a life of both physical and semiotic violence. By its entrance into language the subject theoretically loses its innocence in the same way as the text of The Black Tarantula stylistically loses its innocence by its entrance into the graphically sexual and violent language it associates with questions of gender and identity. Violence lies behind the imposition of identity, both human and textual; it is a "plagiarism" and reworking of a never realized original identity. Thus, violence connects gender and texts to questions of human origin.

Of course, this innocent state of origin, this state prior to that of becoming murderess, is also prior to any identity and state of subjecthood we can experience. It is the apex of western culture's pyramidal epistemology, and as such the point from which we believe we derive our social structures. But this point is so distant we can never see it. Like the peak above the nimbus surrounding the crown of a mountain, we assume it is there; but, as opposed to what one finds with a real mountain, there is no possibility of scaling it for proof.<sup>16</sup>



Acker views this pyramidal epistemology as paradigmatic of mythic logic. She particularly sees its workings behind narrative. Narrative combines with patriarchal institutions and social practices to shape an all too real "model" of the universe, a model routinely adopted for instances of rational explanation, such as the one I referred to at the beginning of this essay. Thus, Acker's second plagiaristic strategy is to disrupt mythic narratives by appropriating them for her own examination of identity. For example, the Black Tarantula begins her first narrative by describing a "happy childhood" during which she worships her father. The father is described by the narrator as "a great and wealthy man, a tall man, whom I look up to" (BT 3).

Implied by the stature of the father is the importance ascribed to being male, an importance re-emphasized in western culture by Freud's reading of the Oedipal myth. While the boy secures his identity by sublimating his desire for the mother and identifying with the power of the father, the girl gains her identity by never completely severing her connection with the mother and identifying with her to the extent that she, also, desires to bear a child of the father. This scenario aligns men with control and women with desire, while conveniently keeping men in control of the reproductive cycle, in control of the issue of desire, and thus in a position to ensure the continuation of mythic logic. Julia Kristeva explains the male's control of

reproductive logic by pointing out, "The father originates and justifies reproductive desire."<sup>17</sup>

Following reasoning similar to Kristeva's, Acker uses father myths as a way of tentatively locating both male and female identities. She finds the Oedipal myth particularly useful because, as she explains it, "it was one of the two or three major myths that I was baby-fed" (HL 18). Acker sees patriarchal myths as having been force-fed to us since birth, shaping the way we think with a violence to which we are frequently oblivious. She hopes to use these myths with a considered violence of her own, one of which we cannot be unaware, to violate them, to try to redo them as they have redone the selves they have helped inform, so that should they be spoon-fed to a future generation of readers they would be digested in a considerably altered form.

For Acker, the question remains, "What can you do with a patriarchal form that will not simply result in yet another patriarchal paradigm?" She does not address this question by giving the patriarchal paradigm the legitimacy implied by its historical acceptance. Rather, she demonstrates just how violent mythically informed conceptions of identity and gender are by hammering her audience with them in all the gauche trappings of their history. In this manner she makes them seem inadequate to fulfill their own labelling task; she attempts to explode them by excess. In one way this process itself is one of

"plagiarized" renaming. Acker takes the ideas of excess and loss of control that have been woman's lot in a Freudian reading and uses them to discredit that reading. The "encore" that Lacan sees as woman's essential signifier is followed so thoroughly in Acker's texts that it disrupts the biological model. For instance, within the first five pages of The Black Tarantula, the narrator has gone through four identities, moved through three countries, described two graphic sexual encounters, been raped once and gone mad.<sup>18</sup> This litany of excess works both in number and degree--the number of events keeps increasing as does the depth of description. Quickly one comes to a tension over whether the narrator can represent a "real" or "rational" subject of any kind, which works for Acker as a metaphorical wiping clean of the identity slate.<sup>19</sup>

By insisting on an historical specificity that locates identity according to mythic codes emphasizing Freud and Sade, Acker anticipates unavoidable consequences. The most obvious is that the inescapable symbol of identity will be the phallus. Acker takes this idea and makes it metaphoric; hence her works excessively display the primacy of the phallus. A second consequence is that since the phallus operates in a Sadean fashion, the sex Acker describes will be violent. In the Oedipal society, sexual violence is the metaphor for identity, including its social and political dimensions. For example, Acker explains why she finds the

Marquis de Sade so useful: "He shed so much light on our Western sexual politics that his name is still synonymous with an activity more appropriately called 'Reaganism'" (Notes 35). The violence she sees behind the formation of contemporary identity she also sees as shaping contemporary politics.

As the example of Sade demonstrates, since "transgressive" practices can cloak political norms, the transgressive writer must be under constant vigilance not to become predictably transgressive. She must constantly rework rhetorical strategies, burning her transgressive bridges behind her. For Acker, this chameleon transgressiveness is her third plagiaristic strategy--the maintaining of a constant flight away from traditional modes of authority and a constant undoing of her own narrative authority. The term "flight" is borrowed here from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, whose Anti-Oedipus Acker admits in an interview to first admiring because "it was very political; it was about what was happening to the economy and about changing the political system."<sup>20</sup> It is likely the anti-myth sentiments of Anti-Oedipus inspired Acker's own politics and encouraged her strategy of decentering Oedipal myths of identity to bring about feminist change. In A Thousand Plateaus Deleuze and Guattari further elaborate on a schematic for challenging mythic political systems by detailing a "rhizome" community. A rhizome

community, they write, "connects any point to any other point . . . [It] is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple."<sup>21</sup> Should it prove feasible, the advantages of such a model for Acker are clear. It would allow her to refer to an image of community without the uniformity of a patriarchal, mythic community, such as Aristotle's political community of man. Thus, it would provide her with a model for plagiarizing the idea of a community.

Accordingly, Acker's narrators are constantly going on flights away from the traditional community of man. For example, in The Black Tarantula, the narrator (or "narrators," since the authoritative, masculine narrator is one of the norms fled) flees from an abundance of sanctioned behaviors and norms: law, sanity, mythically constructed identity, compulsory heterosexuality, and, ultimately, narrative coherence. These flights are developed via the narrator's choices of subject matter, style and tone (categories which, of course, spill into each other).

Acker's flights from traditional masculine narrative are also attempts to discover the possibilities of feminine narrative. Cixous uses a similar imagery of discovery in "The Laugh of the Medusa":

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality . . . about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain minuscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges,

abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous but soon to be forthright." (LM 885)

She suggests that patriarchal mythic tradition has made women believe theirs is a Medusa history--too horrible to behold. Hence, subjects specifically and graphically female have been excluded from consideration in mythic institutions, such as philosophy and literature. Cixous suggests that there is a beauty to be uncovered behind the mythic horror of the Medusa. Similarly, Acker chooses to address the "subject" of femininity by looking the Medusa in the face, by examining the life of the murderess to see what she desires and if she threatens. By doing so she breaks taboos associated with the examination of the female body.

Acker's style, with its frequent and vertiginous breaks and chronological breakdowns, also violates taboos. Not fitting into a linear, patriarchal logic, her style frequently reads as a form of nonsense. Acker herself will pun on making "non-sense" and teaching "un-knowing" in the course of her texts. She sees "non-sense" as challenging mythic logic, similar to the way Susan Stewart, writing in Nonsense, sees it as transgressive: "It becomes apparent that nonsense must of necessity be a kind of taboo behavior. First of all, it involves the constant rearticulation of an anomalous aspect of social life."<sup>22</sup> Nonsense is the domain supposed to be away from sense. Without a strict "real

life" correlative, it is a constant state of exploration. Its potential for discovery represents a threat to established social hierarchies. Stewart observes, "While nonsense is contingent upon the procedures of common sense, as any category is contingent upon its not proper for the definition of the entire range of its significant attributes, nonsense also involves an undermining of the basis of the procedures used in manufacturing common sense" (Nonsense 88-89).

Acker's tone, at once flippant and understated, also constitutes a disregard for and a flight away from propriety. Her characters can maintain a virtual disregard for the most extreme acts of violence, an attribute that makes them disturbing as both mediators of experience and symbolic participants in experience. They manage to take what is emphasized in the text, de-emphasize it, and so emphasize it once again. Thus, their flight away from violence, by ignoring it, underscores it once again. This cyclical treatment of violence complicates the politics of violence. Instead of offering a prescriptive solution such as "violence is terrible and we should stop it," Acker illustrates how the most extreme violence can become so commonplace that there seems to be no need to stop it. In a similar vein, Acker's narrators also play fast and loose with critical thinkers such as Lacan, Foucault, and Baudrillard, frequently making references to them in asides

or as exchanges between degenerates, in order to undermine their authority. Finally, Acker will use humor and language play excessively, especially when they seem inappropriate. Her fondness for the pun is especially interesting in terms of taboo. Avital Ronell points out that throughout history "the pun . . . was always considered 'loose' or 'on the loose' . . . so the pun has always been slightly feminized, homosexualized, having to do with anal eroticism, being two-faced."<sup>23</sup> Acker's humor, then, by its alignment with the feminine or non-sanctioned, is a flight away from patriarchy and patriarchal norms. This flight is continued in the way she will address many of her most "important" ideas via a feminine discourse, one that includes puns, exaggeration and inappropriate word choices. Indeed, both her challenges addressed to masculine logic and her own positions of advocacy can be represented by a "feminine," "nonsensical," discourse. This discourse is a non-logical approach for the un-doing of patriarchal logic.

An interesting comparison to Acker's approach to rebellion can be found in the work of Marguerite Duras. In a series of conversations published in 1974, Duras explains to Xaviere Gauthier the lack of a firm, oppositional stance to society in her works. Susan Suleiman's gloss of the conversation describes how Duras tells Gauthier there is no "putting into question" of society in her writing because "to put society into question is still to acknowledge it . . .



. I mean the people who do that, who write about the refusal of society, harbor within them a kind of nostalgia" (Suleiman 15). She characterizes her own position, again in Suleiman's terms, as one of "total estrangement" (Suleiman 15). However, there is a certain nostalgia to Duras's own position. For one, as Suleiman observes, it is similar to the position of "complete nonconformism" (Breton 47) offered by André Breton at the conclusion of the first Surrealist Manifesto. This fact gives her work a history in the very society she disavows. For another, it sees revolutionary discourse ideally as occurring outside of society, placing it, to refer back to my earlier image, atop the mythic epistemological mountain, amounting to "pure nonsense" and thus already very well within the most oppressive and nostalgic machinations of society. Yet, Duras is expressing a concern for the same problems of identity, myth and appropriation that Acker encounters in The Black Tarantula. Acker chooses to address the problems not by postulating an improbable world beyond society, but by destroying the nostalgia behind acknowledging society.<sup>24</sup>

Nostalgia softens the edges of its object. Hence, Acker's strategy is to sharpen her memory of society by emphasizing the violence behind its identity myths. Thus, she must embrace identity at the same time she tries to kill it off. She is embracing/killing-off both the identity society has coded within her through its myths and the

identity she forges for herself as she plagiarizes those myths. The inclusive, both/and logic in this critique of the identity myth is her line of flight from patriarchal logic.

To see how her strategy works, consider the beginning of The Black Tarantula marked by the epigram, "Intention: I become a murderess by repeating in words the lives of other murderesses," and the chapter title, "Some Lives of Murderesses" (BT 2,3). Becoming a murderess is accepting the woman's role as provided by myth. It is acknowledging a woman's position as threat, as other, and sanctioning the patriarchy's logic for oppressing and controlling that threat. Becoming several murderesses adds a paranoid dimension (in psychoanalytic terms, itself grounded in the masculine fear of lost control) to the castration fear evoked by the murderess: so many women, so many threats. However, the emphasis on "becoming" (the chapter's sub-title is "I become a murderess") also coincides with many contemporary theoretical uses of the word.<sup>25</sup> These becomings, then, also suggest positions not readily accountable for within the woman's role as dictated by mythic logic.

Thus, in The Black Tarantula, one part of the narrative chronicles the experiences of the mythic woman, this murdering "other." In one of its dimensions, the chronicle can be complicit with the myth, as the narrator is usually

with or looking for a lover or husband and she will frequently define herself in terms of her ability to appeal to and please said lover or husband; or critical of its abuses, as she is often traded among or captured by potential husbands and lovers and endures physical and sexual abuse. In either case, the story repeats familiar themes in a familiar manner. Thus, at one point the narrator will lament, "I'm not yet fully planning every step of my future life, but grasping to [a] man who can feed me and clothe me and hold me warm" (BT 11), acting out the submissive role of the successfully contained woman; while at other times, she will be more aggressive, as, for example, in the following description: "I meet the Duc de Bourbon in the house in Piccadilly and become his mistress. Almost the entire rest of my life I devote to His Royal Highness, who I do not love, but use" (BT 12). These examples may present the extremes of a spectrum between passive and active femininity, but they still depict a spectrum in full accord with patriarchal explanations of femininity.

A second line of the narrative undertakes a critique of the mythic woman and of the social forces that create her. Its terms are more consistent with feminist theory that prescribes rewriting woman from an ostensibly female perspective. Frequently, they would not make "sense" in a linear narrative since they include asides, annotations, and

other intrusions that embrace a marginal position. One of the goals behind these intrusions is to reject the notion of the law of the father by rejecting the biological claim in which mythic logic grounds that law. For example, caught in a forbidden romance, the narrator writes, "When my (adopted) father suspects I've been sleeping with my future husband, he slobbers over me. Rape" (BT 4). The word "adopted" displaces the father's mythic authority and suggests that the violence done to the female as a result of her relation to the "father" is illegitimate, even under the terms of its own logic. But the criticism goes even deeper than that: in its very style it challenges the patriarchal logic. Putting "adopted" in parentheses locates the criticism of the mythic father on the far edges of the structure of the sentence, deliberately occupying a marginalized position to effect critique. This embrace stands in contrast to the marginal position women have historically been forced to occupy by the patriarchy in order to limit their capacity for critique; it is a practice of "écriture féminine."

A similar strategy occurs when the narrator, while on the lam, describes how she remains inconspicuous: "I can appear to be sane (a robot)" (BT 8). Sanity is described as a "robot" condition; here depicted as a state of stagnation, even death.<sup>26</sup> Thus, rationality is challenged as the mode through which "mankind" can reach its highest form of life,

a sanction it has had since Aristotle's contention that reason is the highest quality to which man should aspire.

Perhaps the most important task of the parenthetical asides is to discredit idiolects. After her husband discovers her relationship with the duke, the narrator confesses, "I begin to become monomaniacal and learn about the nature (nonnature) of reality" (BT 15). "Nature," then, is the product of a monomaniacal, masculine, perspective on reality. As such it is both acquired and oppressive, and thus "unnatural" in two important senses of the word. To learn about nature is to learn the ideology of patriarchy. This is, of course, "natural" within the patriarchy. However, from the margins, "natural" calls forth its opposite, and to learn about nature is to learn the unnatural. "Unnatural" is "natural" rewritten, or "natural" plagiarized, as the notion of community was plagiarized earlier. Now the word is written to contest the capital "N" granted to "Nature" in patriarchal logic. Acker's texts suggest that all such idiolects need to be challenged in "reality" in order to remove their assumed transcendental stature.<sup>27</sup>

A third dimension of the text acts out the threat of woman. Part of this enactment assumes the conditions of the mythic logic. The masculine virtue of control is replaced by the feminine fault of hysteria as the text jumps between narrators and narrative time. Within the narrative, control

is also lost since desire rules in Acker's libidinally charged prose. However, Acker does not merely present images of femininity gone amuck; she attempts to transform them into a text previously unheard. Susan R. Bordo writes that feminist literature on hysteria and feminine disorder is "that of pathology as embodied protest--unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics--but protest nonetheless."<sup>28</sup> Acker attempts to provide a voice and politics to that protest by making a text from images of hysteria. In the spirit of what Catherine Clément calls the "accusing" hysteric who makes a "mockery of culture,"<sup>29</sup> Acker writes, "These are my insanities" (BT 7), and she proceeds to chronicle accounts of hysteria that serve as flights away from the "meaning" produced by "rational" narrative and toward a critique of that meaning. These flights frequently involve the narrator in sexual intrigue, provided in great detail, effectively "embodying" the text, once again, in an attempt to write woman.

This attempt threatens the masculine subject, attempting to efface masculine meanings as it sorts out its own desires. Consider the following passage:

(I come out of the bathroom buttoning my pants I ask him to put on the T.V. my left hand touches his shoulder he suddenly turns toward me I've wanted him to turn toward me quickly I feel wet lips tongue in the center of my mouth the sudden change from dream-fantasy to reality makes me unable to react he lifts my body over his body on to the bed I feel his tongue enter my mouth the

sudden change from fantasy-dream to reality makes me unable to react we both lie on our right sides I in front of you your cock touches the lips of my cunt enters the wet canal your arms tightly clasp my body around the waist warm fur up and down my spine your cock slips out I bend my body until my hands almost touch my toes though I lose warmth of your skin I can feel your cock moving inside my skin skins I can begin to come the muscles of my cunt begin to move around your cock my muscles free themselves swirl to the tip of my clit out through my legs the center of my stomach new newer muscles vibrate I'm beginning to come I don't know you.) (BT 7)

Here, a prose that mimics both the heat of desire and language of hysteria concentrates on the female fulfilling desire. As she does so, she forgets the male with her, the phallus becomes unimportant. The "beginning to come" may also be read as one of Deleuze's states of coming into being. In this case, the coming into being is made possible by the de-emphasis of the phallus and the emphasis on fulfilling the desire of the "hysterical" text. This desire can only be fulfilled if the text can speak of the "cunt," of the "clit," of the areas of the body hidden, yet fetishized, by masculine versions of female sexuality.

However, it is not only threats in line with the mythic narrative that are tendered in The Black Tarantula. Acker poses threats not accountable for in that economy as well. As she has attempted to rename nature, so she attempts to rename the "natural" threat that woman presents. In the examples above, I argue that Acker attempts to challenge the mythic narrative's depiction of woman by exaggerating the threats they pose so that those designations no longer work

as restrictions. This challenge, however, still remains within the traditional dominion of male/female imaging. Acker also works at exploding this dominion and the masculine systems of logic that sustain it. This attempt requires rejecting dichotomies, such as male/female, that serve as the foundation of that logic.

Acker's tendency to interchange narrators begins such a rejection. It blurs the authority of the narrative by never sanctioning a fixed narrator and denies origins by suggesting an interdependency between narrative voices that cannot be traced back and arrested at the "beginning" of the text. If anything, the beginning of the narrative exists as a shared experience located outside the logic of identity. Not surprisingly, most of the subjects outside that logic are female. All of the murderesses in the first chapter of The Black Tarantula are female. Historically, females have been designated as "other" but recuperated (and subordinated) into masculine logic by that same designation. But in Acker's text, "other" cannot exist as a unified female subject because a subject in her texts can only exist as a whole when interconnected with a series of others. The result is that men can become murderesses, too. As a matter of fact, Acker is careful not to exclude male presence from the "outside" of mythic logic and thus to end up with her own form of essentialism. Beginning in the third chapter, the flickering narrator will occasionally adopt a male



persona. Such is the marriage of Lacanian semiotics to Guattari and Deleuze's rhizome community, a community Deleuze claims connects any point within it to any other point and that is "always in the middle, not at the beginning or end" (DG 21).

However, indeterminacy of identity is not a sufficient rejection of either/or logic. Thus, at one point in The Black Tarantula the narrator informs us, "Now I'm two people" (BT 11). Taken literally, such a happening dramatically increases the permutations one must undergo in order to recognize or fix an identity historically. No longer is identity a question of a succession of personas, but a combination of them. This depiction forces one to adopt a both/and perspective in order to understand identity, a perspective not condoned within the mythic logic. Taken metaphorically, the two-person identity recognizes how finding a new depiction of femininity will necessarily be a two-person equation for women, since their identities have been so thoroughly informed by masculine systems that their current identities are, in Irigaray's terms, "self-representative of a 'masculine subject'" (Irigaray 74).

The "threats" I have described above challenge patriarchal notions of identity by manipulating depictions of identity until they are unrecognizable within the patriarchal logic. However, Acker has an additional tactic

that strikes primarily at the core of that logic. If one accepts my reading of the text thus far, Acker introduces a female identity defined within the logic of a patriarchal, mythic narrative and uses her own narrative to challenge the historic representation of that identity. The text becomes a process, introducing ways one can practice écriture féminine. However, the text-book implications of such a process might locate the novel back within the confines of patriarchal knowledge by suggesting that a mastery of this process can be attained. Thus, Acker's text would have a logic of its own, a teleologics, of inscribing a different way of writing woman. Coming to "know" the process would be part of experiencing the text. In this way the world of patriarchal oppression might yield to the world of feminine liberation. Text would become history, and, conversely, history would privilege journeys of experience via literature as one of its manifestations.<sup>30</sup> However, Acker, in an attempt to avoid recuperation, never completes her journeys, never lets them fall back into a categorization as history. Thus, the journey of the Black Tarantula is repeated and arrested in I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining and Peter's journey in Great Expectations recurs in My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini. These journeys must be retaken, lifted from one context and put into another, to leave open the possibility for change. They must be plagiarized, just as notions of community and nature

have been plagiarized, precisely because once put into a text they have a value as history and need to show history as that which must always change.

Thus, Acker retains the theme of the journey. In fact in the interview that begins Hannibal Lecter, My Father she insists, "I want the reader to come right into the text because that's the only way you can take the journey" (HL 15). However, as the notions of "nature" and "community" have been redefined, or plagiarized, so must the notion of the "journey" be redefined. Acker takes the road the character and the reader travel and collapses it in on itself. For instance, in The Black Tarantula, the first chapter begins with the narrator born into the patriarchal role of "murderess," moves through a process of deconstructing that role, but ends with the narrator screaming louder and louder and telling us she is "hysterical," returning her to another female designation. The second chapter subsequently begins with another murderess born. Acker sees the need to make the journey cyclical, and only slightly open-ended, to give it an image other than that of patriarchal progress.<sup>31</sup> This repetition works both to demonstrate how difficult the process of deconstructing millennia of masculine codes will be and to emphasize that all knowing must also call up its opposite and be an unknowing lest it remain in mythic logic.

Journeys of unknowing become increasingly important to Acker in her later works.

The process for solving the problems about identity suggested above relies on not viewing problems in terms of linear successions such as question/answer or cause/effect. Repetition must be radically altered; process must be done and redone and must be redefining itself all the while. It must not be reducible to a simple rule or method. This is Acker's interpretation of "practicing difference": difference itself must be self-different. In other words, from the beginning of her career, Acker has been sensitive to the criticism levied against what Howard Felperin terms the "institution of deconstruction" that an "anxiety arises [in it] out of its own uncertain potential for institutionalization, the questionable capacity of a practice so profoundly oppositional, skeptical, and anti-systematic to turn into a transmissible, teachable program in its own right."<sup>32</sup> Acker voices her concern about the institutionalization of critical theory in her interview with Ellen G. Friedman: "When I was first introduced to the work of Foucault and Deleuze, it was very political; it was about what was happening to the economy and about changing the political system. By the time it was taken up by the American academy, the politics had gone to hell. It became an exercise for some professors to make their careers" (Conversation 20-21). She realizes the danger of a text or

an approach remaining still. In her own works she suggests that in order for change to occur one must take and retake the narrative journey, within a single text, and from text to text. In this manner, she hopes to make one respond to the accruing changes that make the same journey different, never giving time for radical acts to settle into institutional routine.

That is why certain recurrent questions haunt both The Black Tarantula and the rest of Acker's work. They are re-asked and re-answered, inciting change both by accruing expanding shades of meaning and reworking "old" meanings through new terrain. For example, in the opening of the second chapter of The Black Tarantula, the narrator says, "My father hates me . . . All he wants to do is rape me" (BT 23), and part of the chapter proceeds to critique the Oedipal myth in a manner similar to the one introduced in the first chapter. However, the narrator also says:

(I work hard I still can't sleep with who I want  
 (1) I get refused (2) I'm too shy to speak to  
 anyone if I work harder get famous then everyone  
 will sleep with me I won't have to be so shy I'm  
 tired I want to be the Virgin Mary with a steel  
 bar stuck against my bloody cunt inside of me are  
 red cocks like dogs, animals whiz down midnight  
 buns on diamond motorcycles I start yelling.) (BT  
 26)

This passage enhances the critique of myth in a number of ways. First of all, the narrator's critique, though it occurs in parenthesis--inside the margins--compromises those margins by enumerating its concerns in linear, numerical,

fashion. By embedding a symptom of mythic logic within an objection to it, Acker parodies the idea that rational order underlines all problems as well as casts an accusing finger at herself by demonstrating how oppositional positions can easily become complicit in their own reappropriation by relying on traditional forms for presentation. Secondly, the mythic image has been refigured. Although sexuality is still graphically detailed, the narrator replaces the Oedipal myth with the Virgin/whore dichotomy as the paradigm for cultural violence towards women. This example expands Acker's critique of mythic narrative from historical readings of the Oedipal myth to include popular understandings of religious dogma. Third, the degree of excess is escalated both in degree, by the drawn out and graphic image of the "bloody red cunt," and in offense, by that image's near sacrilegious apposition to the "Virgin Mary." Acker expands the range and degree of possible offense in her critique as a way of mimicking the escalating violence in the lessons of history as well as a way of practicing self-difference.

If one wants to look for markers of progress in Acker's cyclic journeys, the moments of expanded critique are the closest one can get. In The Black Tarantula, each chapter offers at least one such expansion. The third chapter expands the notion of the compound identity. The chapter begins, "I'm two people and the two people are making love

to each other" (BT 29). In the first chapter the narrator's identity claim was restricted simply to being two people. Now, those two people further complicate the identity question by destabilizing their compound identity through the act of love. One way of interpreting this additional action is to read the lesbian love story that follows metaphorically and to see the couple as the "I," as an image of, in Irigaray's terms, the sex which is not one. This image is consistent with the plural view of identity Acker has presented thus far in the text as well as a movement away from the narcissistic image that Acker and Irigaray see in the sex which is one.

However, following, and in contrast to, the lesbian encounter in chapter three, a male narrator describes his sexual exploits. His tone is relentlessly masculine; he is objectifying and adversarial toward the women with whom he engages, he is performance oriented, and he identifies himself with his cock. But he is also the single "I" narrating the section, just as there was only a single "I" narrating the previous section. Thus, the two people making love, the two people identified as constituting the subject "I" of the chapter, might be the sexist male and the lesbian female. However unlikely this coupling, it provides an accurate image of Acker's plagiarism--a union of a male text with a text with strictly female concerns.

This coupling works toward a solution by appropriating mythic logic. Its very form forces the formation of new subjects by insisting on a violent coupling, as Acker suggests mythic sexuality does. Acker's appropriation is thus doomed to fail unless it can redirect the violence it employs away from traditional results of violent identity formations.

The narrative points to its own tenuous position. Recurrent references to the narrator reading the works of the Marquis de Sade suggest an awareness of the sadistic violence behind the "sex" it advocates. This violence is not overt in the descriptions of the sex between the characters, but it may lie in the orchestration of the scenario that could create the "hybrid" identity referred to above. "Making love" is clearly a euphemistic description of the sex between Acker's characters, since what she details is a violent clash of texts and ideologies. Such a narrative strategy, however, is close to Sadean, and, as Barthes has shown, the Sadean character always possesses a control of language relative to his victim. Here, that control is suggested by the narrative that wants to make violent sex work for its ends, and we are its intended victims. Acker is probably aware of Deleuze's observation that sadism basically has a patriarchal structure. Thus, she needs to plagiarize it, as she has tried to do with nature and community, to make it work for her. She must ask



herself if even by employing a sadistic strategy she prompts recuperation. This possibility is addressed in the text when the narrator says, "I'm trying to make someone else's fantasy, fantasy caused by fears, my reality so I can deal with my fear. I can do it but I don't want to. Can I do it?" (BT 39). The remainder of The Black Tarantula tests whether Acker can plagiarize the sadism that mythic "fantasies" of identity have turned into real subjects' fears. To accomplish this task the narrator must equate sex and writing in a Sadean manner and then plagiarize the result. She will test her solution in a text that, while amenable to change, is all too aware of the strident voice of the patriarchy it challenges. Thus, the narrative spends considerable time tracing the development of sexual violence through mythic narrative.

As a way of prefacing her discussion of mythic narratives the narrator asks herself, "Why do I still fuck?" (BT 41). Her only answer lies in her observation, "All I have left is my writing" (BT 41). Writing and fucking are metaphorical equivalents for Acker. They can both lead to creation--of a subject and a text--but each is inauthentic from Acker's perspective: subjects are plagiarized mythic identities while texts are plagiarized mythic ideas. In the vulgar sense, Acker suggests one can get fucked by engaging in either act. Thus, both are a violence done to one, just as one contributes to a violence while performing either.

In a text that is a montage of written sex and violence, the narrator has good reason for asserting later on in the chapter, "My work and my sexuality combine" (BT 50).

Both work and sexuality can be transgressive, and both creative, but each of them can leave one vulnerable. Acker is concerned about vulnerability, especially with regard to her work's susceptibility to recuperation, or, in my words, to the complications that beset her working solution. In The Black Tarantula, these concerns are crystallized in juxtaposed sexual reveries that refer to the combination of work and sexuality. In the first, sexual union merges identities:

Again I feel the complete joy of giving myself, myself fully since I don't know this man, to another person and having the person equally, for both our pleasure and pain, give himself to me. A person who I will never see again, not recognize, so no ties can interfere with our delight. As I come again and again, his lips working softly against my clit, I again rejoice that I have no personal friendship, I dream, fantasize, awake briefly to meet someone and come, to worship my own coming. I'm almost asleep. I want to make myself become/put down everything before they try to destroy an anomaly such as me. I hate the robot society I know. (BT 46)

This excerpt accomplishes what Acker's strategy of plagiarism sets out to do. The lovers give and take for each other in a way that takes them out of mythic logic--he is unrecognizable, she has no ties. They merge in a flight away from mythic Cartesian identity in a remaking that in a Deleuzian manner celebrates its own coming, both sexually

and into being, as it opposes itself to the rational, stagnant, "robot" world.

However, there is a contrasting reverie that sees desire and accounts of desire as co-opted by mythic logic:

I don't want to escape now. My revolt against the death society collides with my desire to be touched I have no identity. I can feel the hand softly running up and down my leg inside the leg . . . I rise there against the new lover there is only this and my account of this I immediately begin to come, I see a frame around me: my space. The rest is blackness, money-death-necessity coming to destroy my tentative beginning human sex, I rub my body against P. I become a parrot. O.K. (BT 48-49)

In this passage, the narrator gives into desire as it is defined by the masculine world around her, a world where she must love "P" (the phallus, Peter), and so a world in which she has "no identity." Thus, she sees a frame around her--her designated jail within the patriarchy. Around her the elements of the patriarchy--money, death, and necessity--destroy what creativity, her "beginning sex," could accomplish; and her account of this experience, the account that is "real" in patriarchal language, she acknowledges as a mere parroting of words already provided for her, a parroting to which she agrees.

Acker has posited that because of a Sadean method of forming identity, the historical female self is a male myth. In The Black Tarantula, the chapter entitled "i explore my miserable childhood. i become william butler yeats" explores that myth in terms of sexual identity and

creativity. The dual title names one chapter, suggesting that on one level it names one thing--the history/childhood of the female that is still the story of a male. The chapter proceeds as "evidence" (the chapter's sub-title) of this contention. Much of the evidence is familiar. For example, the narrator is told by her mother that, "[her] 'father' isn't [her] real father" (BT 64), again suggesting that the "truth" of this childhood is illegitimate. Nonetheless, to Acker, it is historical. At the end of the chapter she lists her sources as The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats and herself. These sources, like the chapter's title, name distinct elements--the narrator and William Butler Yeats, one male, one female--that combined refer to one subject, the masculine subject, the only subject that historically has existed as a source under mythic logic.

The story behind creativity, the milieu in which Acker hopes to challenge identity, is itself a story that has oppressed the feminine, especially with regard to a writer like Yeats who set out to foreground myth in politics. Acker needs a flight from Yeats' history, his masculine time-line. The final chapter of The Black Tarantula is entitled "the story of my life." In it Acker presents a chronicle that begins by referring to her "autobiography," but soon flees from the "truth" behind her story. She presents a chronology not consistent with the facts. It is

a chronology that takes her both into the future and into the past, a chronology that suggests that any autobiography that presents the more or less verifiable account of a life presents in Acker's view the more or less verifiable lifetime of feminine oppression. Thus, Acker plagiarizes the notion of autobiography, which to her always repeats versions of the same story:

1952-1957 Educated by private tutor, the Black Virgin Mary, and I teach her to suck my cunt. She corresponds with many famous poets. My mind, my sole repository of freedom, is beginning to be born. (BT 78)

This passage declares itself to be a plagiarized autobiography by declaring itself to be a story beginning to be born. To begin anew it must move away from the myths that have informed previous autobiographies. Thus, Acker takes the Virgin Mary and makes her black. This alteration aligns the Virgin Mary with the Black Tarantula, the murderess who is attempting to rewrite identity. By "dirtying" the virgin in form, Acker can dirty her in content, in the vulgar sense, by having her perform acts that Christianity eschews but which nonetheless physically keep the virgin a virgin. The result is a Virgin Mary who can inspire a becoming because she can perform a sexual act that is not violent. However, to Christians, such a depiction of the Virgin Mary is a violence to their religion. Yet while Acker recognizes her violence to Christian myth, she suggests that the Christian community (a

mythic community) does not recognize its violence to feminine identity.

Acker's autobiography violates the rules of mythic time and the institutions of mythic structure. It leads her not to her own end, but back to her novel's beginning, as she takes stock of her "life" and asks, "Am I really a criminal?" (BT 80), a question seemingly answered when the Black Tarantula first asserts, "I become a murderess" (BT 3). This cycle can suggest both that the murder of mythic identity is no longer a crime, that her plagiarism is a success, and that her murder of mythic identity is complete, that her plagiarism must be redone. Both suggestions are valid because of Acker's inclusive both/and perspective.

The Black Tarantula concludes her narrative by bringing it back full cycle. She leaves open the question of whether her project has worked. She observes that she is still "constantly terrorized and starved by laws" (BT 90). Acker's suggestion here is that these laws can take over her narrative and starve it of its impact, that her story is murdered instead of murdering. This return to mythic logic is the down side of her cycle. Acker's subsequent two novels, I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining and The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec, continue her cyclical examination of identity and continue to explore problems, such as reappropriation, that her

narrators have discovered as important. However, they find even more terrorizing laws.

It would be naive of Acker to believe that one trip through her perverse wonderland of identity would be sufficient to accomplish the plagiarizing project laid out in The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula. As a matter of fact, it would go against one of the tenets of that strategy--that the narrative journey must all the time be retaken to ensure that it does not stay the same. Thus, Nymphomaniac and Toulouse Lautrec must be both the narrative journey retaken and a different narrative journey. This demand requires the both/and logic that The Black Tarantula introduced, a logic reaffirmed in the first half of the epigraph to Nymphomaniac, which reads, "This is very nonpolitical, therefore reactionary." <sup>33</sup> At the same time the task requires a process of advancement, a Deleuzuan becoming, for instance, an intention suggested by the second half of the epigraph, which asks "But what would the world have to be like for these events to exist?" (NI 94). Both Nymphomaniac and Toulouse Lautrec mirror The Black Tarantula by suggesting that such an existence means overcoming the violence that historically has been behind mythic formations of identity. The ostensible goal of Nymphomaniac, the task of the nymphomaniac searching for the beginnings of desire, of which in the masculine economy she has too much, is ironically equivalent to that of The Black Tarantula, the

murderess looking for identity, which she threatens or destroys. And the goal of Toulouse Lautrec, to solve "the case of the murdered twerp,"<sup>34</sup> also points to a violence lying behind the narrator's identity.

To confront and reapply the violence directed against them, the narrators of these texts must appropriate mythic forms of logic. For example, in Nymphomaniac, the chapter "i find an object for my desire" precisely repeats a party seduction scene four times. This repetition calls to mind the progression of mythic time that has seen one masculine paradigm replace another. But by taking it to the extreme of exact duplication, Acker is able to challenge the mythic code. Under mythic logic, the primitive myth, with its emphasis on explaining unknown origins, eventually gives way to the rational novel, with its emphasis on exalting purpose. In effect, the mythic story becomes teleologic: it seeks the limits of rationality. Primal repetition, getting bogged down in one's past, is disdained as waste or stagnation; moral repetition, pursuing the rational quest, is lauded as exemplary. Acker reverses the logic. When her text repeats itself, literally gets bogged down in its own past, it is developing. She makes the growth of the text contingent on the fact that at some points it will remain the same. And when Acker's protagonists pursue a quest, they challenge rationality and morality by embracing hysteria and engaging in acts not historically seen as



moral, particularly acts that foreground female sexuality. As this sexuality, primal in its energy, grows, the possibility for the female self existing beyond the ligatures of masculine notions of propriety grows.

Toulouse Lautrec also appropriates mythic logic. The murder investigation, a mythic form of discovery, is modeled after a popular detective story genre--Hercule Poirot presides. But Poirot discovers that he must look for "another type of murder" (TL 223). His discovery is significant because in the violent worlds Acker depicts, murderous violence is the basis for identity. Thus, asking who kills is as pointless as asking who eats or defecates. The more vexing question is who was killed, a question that draws attention to marginalized subjects, such as women, who are effaced in patriarchal politics.

In order to make the appropriation work, Acker must move it away from mythic configurations. In Nymphomaniac, the flight away takes the form of a revolution. However, it is a revolution that disassociates itself from conventional images of armed uprisings. She includes a chapter significantly entitled "distrust" in Nymphomaniac where she describes the mythic revolution and where she sees its shortcomings:

If I trust you  
A Revolution will happen.  
If a revolution's fight guns  
No thing good or new.

Today's society makes us

Murderers liars assassins.  
 If I trust you  
 A revolution will happen. (NI 161)

The revolution of guns--the historical revolution conducted in phallic terms--brings "no thing good or new." However, a revolution conducted by the murderers, liars and assassins--Acker's marginalized subjects from The Black Tarantula--offers at least the possibility for revolution.

Toulouse Lautrec also offers a mythic reconfiguration. As Poirot proceeds to look for another type of murder, the text presents a Genesis story, narrated by Peter, that describes how the present murdering phallic economy came to be. This story describes how a "hairy baboon" devours the world. Within that story, a small frightened cat watches and avoids the baboon. While the cat sleeps, she dreams her own genesis in a forest where animals cohabitate rather than devour.

In fact, Nymphomaniac and Toulouse Lautrec follow The Black Tarantula in structure and design as well as theme. The layered narrative of The Black Tarantula is repeated in Nymphomaniac when Peter's story occurs within the story of the nymphomaniacal narrator, and again when the cat's dream occurs within the Peter's story of the creation of the world, which, itself, is occurring within Poirot's murder investigation. Even the working solution/test-of-solution pattern is followed. In Nymphomaniac, Peter-time, the time behind Peter's creation of the world, must be unchronicled;

and in Toulouse Lautrec, the "other" type of murder must be solved. Both novels also end with their solutions possibly reappropriated: the narrator in Nymphomaniac, with Peter Gordon and the Black Tarantula, ends up sentenced to "a lifetime punishment in a small cell" (NI 190) in Folsom State Prison, and Toulouse's and Poirot's murder investigation is swallowed by a series of other genre stories--true-story confessionals, cinema, and popular novels--that re-inscribe the mythic creation of the world.

Through the course of her works Acker finds it increasingly difficult to plagiarize mythic stories successfully; or, in the terms of her images, to keep the baboon's story from swallowing the cat's. This difficulty is crystallized in Acker's use of autobiographical material. As she progresses through The Black Tarantula and Nymphomaniac, Acker incorporates increasing amounts of autobiographical material, frequently highlighted, as in the sub-chapter title "(More details about my actual childhood)" in the "i explore my miserable childhood. i become william butler yeats" chapter of The Black Tarantula.

However, the designation "actual" only refers to an historic Kathy Acker, whose identity, as the chapter attests, is informed by masculine representations of femininity. Cindy Sherman uses similar masculine representations of femininity in a series of "autobiographical" photographs and Eileen O'Neil discusses

how such claims of autobiographical authenticity frequently disrupt what is alleged as authentic:

In Sherman's work an ambiguous reference to the artist/agent disappears in the midst of a proliferation of representations as: sex-symbol, coed, working girl, ingenue, and so on. The images entice us to say that if anything is denoted it is a female stereotype. As a paradigmatic case of postmodern art, these images do not represent a particular woman but the problematics of representation itself . . . what seems to be given as a sexual offering is forthwith deconstructed.<sup>35</sup>

In her "autobiography," Acker tries to replace the actual mythically constructed self with a self remade by weaving her autobiographical material through her plagiarizing text. Since in this manner the autobiographical material is continually reframed, the reader is forced to note that no particular representation of Acker can "really" be she. This uncertainty is what Acker hopes to have seen as "actual," since it opens the possibility for other than mythic representations of femininity to be seen as "real."

However, the optimism of Acker's autobiography is challenged by the autobiographical fact of Peter. Peter, modeled after Acker's first husband, Peter Gordon, is also an historic microcosm of the "peter" in every woman's life, not necessarily as lover but certainly as influence. Peter's functions are manifold. Among them, he serves as the oppositional voice to Acker's plagiarism, the mythic male subject that plagiarism needs to "murder" or "unchronicle," and the politically empowered subject through

whom Acker can speculate on the working of the institutions that inform him. However, once Peter's story is introduced, it begins to devour the narrator's story.

Significantly, Peter is introduced in a chapter entitled "i find an object for my desire." This title plays on Laconian semiotics and ultimately puns on the name of the "object," Peter. The play of the title operates on the level that in a masculine economy the object of the desire is the female, and to the extent that this object desires, she desires the phallus. In Acker's version of this scenario, the female does desire the phallus, the "peter," but Peter is also the object of desire. To some extent both the "I" who desires and the object desired are masculinized and castrated in an anatomical rendering of both/and logic.

Acker begins to examine the patriarchal myth in politically real terms in a chapter called "peter's story." In many ways it is the story of patriarchy. It begins predictably. Peter admits, "I was born evil and became more evil by chance" (NI 127). Acker alludes to the violence behind patriarchal formulations of identity and also asserts that this historical condition is not a necessary one. Peter's story is a chronicle heavily concerned with his past, how one becomes a "peter." It is especially critical of the institutions that shape the "real" male. For example, Peter describes his school days as isolated: "My schoolmates respect me, even worship me, and stay away from

me" (NI 127). This near transcendent isolation, called "individualizing" by Muriel Dimen,<sup>36</sup> is a cultural ideal emphasizing rational control, the code of the Marlboro man, who may want others but will not need them. Dimen adds that it also "makes us hate to resemble women, whose very interest in relationships and intimacy seems mired in the mud of need" (Dimen 41). Acker suggests that this code is institutionalized in schools, and, of course, we can recognize it in the various popular media--movies, television, music, the media--that supplement our education. Acker's suggestion is that this is the code that leads to phallus worship. Peter's phallus worship is imaged in the text when he makes love to his only friend--Peter Gordon.

Acker attempts to break the narcissistic cycle of Peter's phallus worship by merging Peter's story with actual autobiographical facts about her stint working in a live sex show. Acker suggests that the woman performing sex on demand for a predominantly male audience is an unvoiced double of Peter's phallus worship. She merges the effete classical myth with the visceral personal disclosure as a way of exposing the politics behind the myth. After this merging, Peter once again encounters his double:

This was not me: this was Peter Gordon. Unlike me he wore no mask nor cloak. I thought he was me as he stood there, the most beautiful man I've ever seen shining as a light. "You have conquered, and I yield. Yet henceforth art thou also dead--dead to the World as it now exists and as you hate it. In me didst thou exist--and, in

my death, see by this image, which is thine own,  
how utterly thou has murdered thyself." (NI 142)

The description above might be the fulfillment of the plagiarizing task. Peter is dead to the historical world and remade as a shining new hybrid subject. However, this romantic ending, as doubly emphasized by the use of antiquated prose, is framed within the logic of patriarchy. Once again, Acker pulls back from claiming victory, acknowledging it is only easy to kill off history metaphorically, and that metaphorical killing is compromised by its reliance on patriarchal form. It is interesting to note that the romantic style and content of the passage quoted above is Acker's failure at the same time that it is a successful romantic ending in the high romantic style of gothic romance. Acker is relying on our recognition that romantic endings are frequently seen as "feminine," to suggest that such depictions of femininity are failures.

The chronicle of Peter works to plagiarize his identity in form, but this form is restricted to the novel. Thus, Peter is also associated with a broader scheme, a scheme of time. This time of patriarchy, "peter time," is treated as more complicated than Peter's story in the text because the time of patriarchy is more complicated than the form of it. It is easier to rework the form of Peter in the time of the novel, the fictional time, than in the time of the novel, the political time in which it is produced. Since that latter time is male, "peter," time, Peter's relationship to

time is complex--it includes both the fictional time of the novel and the historical time in which the novel is produced. For example, the narrator of the "i find an object for my desire chapter" reflects on her relationship with/to Peter:

(1) Peter precedes me; or I precede Peter. (2) Peter and I occupy together; and Peter disappears, I remain. (3) Peter only: Peter moves, changes color, etc. Or me only: I move, change color, etc. A present duration supposedly means no change. Consider (2). In (2), Peter's and my durations overlap: overlapping is the essence of duration. Because duration must be more complicated than (1) which can be presented by a series of dots on a time line. (3) is continuity: (2) and (3) are the ingredients of duration (or of the present). Apply this notion to duration to another individual: that of identity. My identity at any time depends on (my) lacks of stabilities. (NI 118)

This formula is difficult to decipher. One way to look at this definition of time is as a critique of essentialist time--the time of Peter--as opposed to plagiarized time--the time Acker hopes to realize through her text. Essentialist time, labelled "(1)," is the historical chronicle that Acker's journey attempts to undo. The first step in plagiarizing this time is to form a dual identity, labelled "(2)," where Peter and the narrator are occupying time together, but to have the "peter" dominance in that co-occupation disappear. This co-occupation is what the narrator calls "overlapping," an image of merging, that she believes is the "essence of duration." The term "duration" suggests "endure," and the narrator suggests that the only



way that the female can endure is if she can disrupt peter time. Ultimately, this means making the time of the novel endure outside of the novel. Identities forged in such a time would depend on instabilities, not remain anchored in masculine logic. This conception of the successful plagiarized project, of course, incorporates a built-in self-critique, since it is introduced within the numerically structured form of patriarchal logic.

Peter has a conception of time, too, one which addresses specifically what endures in the world:

Say there's two theories of time. Absolutist theory of time: the world is in time. The world, events occur in moments. These moments can be mapped on a time line. Relativist theory of time: time is in the world. Time is the temporal relations of events. An event can be earlier (later) than or simultaneous with another event. The first theory suggests that individuals (subjects) are the true substance. The second theory suggest [sic] that temporal characters are the true substance of the world. (NI 136)

Despite the either/or logic of Peter's vision, a logic that, being, Peter he cannot avoid, his vision presents conceptions similar to those of the narrator above.

Absolutist time is the time of our history, where people are real subjects and real subjects are singular and male. The "second" theory suggest that temporal events are real, and temporal events include a simultaneity that might allow for the compound subject. Once the compound subject is enacted in time, the resultant "real" history of time can be chronicled differently, perhaps unchronicled. Peter says,

"I is a (predicate) relation" (NI 138), suggesting that it is a construct relying on the past and of the past, and, hence, the "I" who is always male, always Peter, may come to be a subject of the past.

However, Peter's story proves difficult to unchronicle. In the final chapter of Nymphomaniac, both Acker and Peter wind up incarcerated as "dykes" in Folsom State Prison. From one perspective, Acker celebrates her textual victory, having transformed the masculine subjects into feminine. On the other hand, these subjects are still imprisoned--and the prison turns transgressive identity into male fantasy. For example, the first two dykes described in the chapter are engaging in lesbian sex described in the manner of a confessional magazine. And within the prison the dykes who wield power are not-so-coincidentally male dykes. Thus, even within a community populated by dykes, feminine gender concerns occupy a secondary position on the agenda of the privileged subjects of the community.

The problem Acker realizes is that Peter has never been the controlling agent in Peter's story. Her image of the masculine as monolithic has been too singular. Peter is a prisoner, too. And the prison he occupies with the narrator controls its population by classifying prisoners. Prisoners who resist classification are sent to the "adjustment center" where they are reclassified. Reclassification conceals a mythic type of violence. Acker

writes that it includes a "program" involving "aversion therapy including electric and insulin shock, fever treatments, sodium pentothal, anectine (death-simulating drug), [and] antitestosterone injections (to neutralize sex hormones)" (NI 177). When two prisoners write a letter urging prison reforms, they have it confiscated as "revolutionary writing" and get reclassified.

In effect, Acker envisions a world where both male and female subjects are trapped by an institutional power that controls representation. While it will take a transgression against the rules of the institution for anyone to get out, it will take a double transgression for a female "dyke" to get out, since the male dyke is still privileged within the prison.

Such a stranglehold on the apparatus for change will exist as long as change is seen in mythic terms, as for example in a romantic escape inspired by the mythic logic of justice versus injustice, as Acker's prison setting suggests. Furthermore, within such a setting the female is twice convicted: she is both guilty of her sex and guilty of her desire, especially if that desire includes the desire to discredit her guilt. While the logic of patriarchal institutions make us all guilty of an "original sin," which we seek to atone for by creating just institutions that inevitably imprison us, females are guilty of an unspeakable sin, in the sense of degree and the sense that justice does

not speak of it nor let it speak itself. The sentence for this sin is to remove the feminine from the institutional power structure, and thus to keep that power structure mythic. Change, such as the change Acker describes in her text where all prisoners are dykes, is simply a means of reclassification, applied where the sentries of mythic justice deem fit.

This is why plagiarizing Peter does not disrupt the power of Peter's story. In Toulouse Lautrec the murder that must be solved occurs at the genesis of Western culture and its conception of identity. In the novel's terms, it is the murder that lies behind "the creation of the world," the title to the chapter that follows Poirot's search for another type of murder. The chapter "the creation of the world" contains several stories of genesis. It is concerned with the link between the representational and the institutional with which Acker concluded Nymphomaniac. In it, Acker's Peter returns and "rubbing his sore red cock" declares "I'm going to tell the first story tonight" (TL 226). Out of Peter's story springs the oppression of religion, coeval with the first story. This scenario is the scenario for murder. Representation becomes institution. Peter essentially masturbates a story out of himself. It is an original "sin" of sex that can create only "men" in a masculine culture. It is a murder of diversity. From Peter's spilled and one-sided seed springs a first story, a

first institution. As that seed/story spreads, other stories, other institutions, get created and passed along via the various mediums for telling stories. Ironically, Peter's sin does come back to haunt him as these mediums become shaped into a masculine culture that imprisons Peter, as well as any other subject. Acker's test of her working solution in Toulouse Lautrec explores the way in which various contemporary media perpetuate Peter's first murder.

The final four chapters of the novel explore the ways patriarchal culture reclassifies subjects based on the model of the devouring baboon. Peter's story is significant in the way it describes the workings of the murder culture. The story is about a cat's unrequited love for a big hairy baboon. Though the baboon will not love her, he uses her for favors. The cat brings the baboon all the food in the world, which he swallows. Then he asks for control over all the snakes, whom she captures and brings to him. But when he asks for power, the cat hides away and watches as the baboon gains power himself by continuing to swallow up all opposition to himself until "there exist three balls, earth, baboon and moon" (TL 229). The story's form is not new to Acker. The feminine becomes increasingly marginalized as the masculine consumes, turning itself into nature and even making that nature transcendent. As the story continues, it reflects another of Acker's concerns. The cat returns and now the baboon loves her. This scene represents the threat

of appropriation. The baboon attempts to claim the marginalized qualities he has labelled as "feminine" by attempting to be sensitive. He claims that he realizes the need to "open up," insists on his vulnerability, claims that he is afraid of being hurt. In this way his love will swallow the cat. Nothing has changed, however. When the cat rejects him, the baboon laments, "I don't understand love, it's not rational" (TL 230), retreating to the mythic "masculine" logic of the culture he represents.

Meanwhile, opposed to the baboon's reality, is the cat's dream. She begins a dream that seems idyllic, a counterpoint to the baboon's world, but this world is soon transmogrified into depicting the violent and consuming reality of the baboon that exists. Two salient critiques arise from this dream. The first is that the dream of a matriarchy replacing a patriarchy is itself a useless romantic notion in need of plagiarizing. The second is that appropriation can occur even in the place of marginalized "female" desire, since even these desires occur within the broader framework of masculine culture. The cat's dream is still a part of Peter's story even if it is a dream that attempts to exclude the baboon. The imbedding of stories is not restricted to the baboon and the cat. It is a motif throughout the novel. Peter's story occurs in Acker's novel, which may also occur in Peter's story. Acker worries

that she will ultimately be the cat dreaming a reality that gets killed off before it can ever exist.

This fear is realized when various other genres devour Acker's murder mystery, in effect, reclassifying it. Among the more striking of these reclassifications are plagiarisms of Lolita, tabloid pop culture, via the romance of James Dean and Janis Joplin, and finally the movie Key Largo. The characters frequently reappear from text to text, getting reclassified to suit their new role. (This reclassification is an ironic appropriation of Acker's sentiment that "overlapping is the essence of duration.") Acker's fear is that no "new" role is new--it is merely a version of what came before because all the possible identities are plugged into the representational apparatus of mythic culture. Peter is no longer a personal guilt but an institutional one. The baboon is no longer Peter the individual, but a story worked through various representational forms that have swallowed him.

Acker sees the surreptitious elements of American government as the contemporary version of the devouring baboon. Thus, her novel concludes with the CIA interfering in the business of Johnny Rocco. The CIA is a prime example of an institution created by mythic logic that now devours the "baboons" who created it.<sup>37</sup>

Rocco is one of those baboons, a narcissistic male who preys on women and profits at the expense of his friends.

But Rocco, like Peter before him, is also trapped. By the time he understands that the CIA oversees his operation and he attempts to flee, he realizes that he has "no idea where to go" (TL 310)--he is already dead as an autonomous subject. And dead, too, is Acker's interest in the personal subject per se--she finds her political aspirations made her envision the world too personally and so blinded her to the sight of what Judith Butler describes as "the multiply contested sites of meaning"<sup>38</sup> where the challenge of rethinking postmodern identity lies.

### Plagiarizing Institutions

At the end of The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec, the narrator is thoroughly frustrated by her inability to gain access to an "individual" who is not thoroughly mediated by the political apparatus. She is left, like Johnny Rocco, running with no idea where to go. Finally, Acker determines that she must go beyond considerations of the individual in her examination of identity. Beginning with Blood and Guts in High School, Acker's narratives move toward plagiarizing what lies behind identity--the institutions and politics that inform it. She does not abandon her use of violent and sexual images as critiques of identity; she strategically redirects them. In a way, she is absolutely consistent, since she has maintained all along that a journey must continually be retaken as it changes. She is still



following the map of unrealized desire she first laid out. Her first novels are a journey here.

Blood and Guts in High School might be Acker's most ambitious, if unfocused, work. It takes all the frustrations she accumulated from her considerations of identity--the expanding critique that encompasses politics, various social institutions, such as the family and religion, and representational media--and attempts to translate them into a form that she can include in a single text. The novel's formal range--it includes poetry, prose, parable, translation, graffiti, drawings, calligraphy and cartography--is a response to the range of unresolved representations of self that thwarted her plagiarisms in Toulouse Lautrec. Her venue, high school, is the appropriate place to learn to "read" these various representations, and her novel gives a section, a class, as it were, to each one. High School is also an appropriate place for her to begin formulating her critique of institutions that inform identity, and as Acker expands that critique, high school becomes symbolic of many such institutions. These institutions--public education, the family, the church, the government (to name a few of the more notable)--are modals frequently seen as enabling but through which Acker sees identities violently forged. Thus, the blood and guts found in Acker's high school is similar

to the murderess found lurking behind the childlike life of the black tarantula.

Blood and Guts in High School is a novel of learning and flights away from it. Its protagonist, Janey Smith, is a Jane Doe, a young girl whose identity is entirely dependent on males because of the formidable patriarchy within which she lives. Janey is a type, a character cut off from her matriarchal roots (she never knew her mother) and so described as one who "depended on her father for everything."<sup>39</sup> Acker acknowledges Janey's status as a type, calling her "a cardboard figure" (Conversation 17) in her interview with Ellen G. Friedman. Her concentration on types arises from her disdain with examining individual identity. Because it lacks dimension, the type steers attention to the forces that created it, suggesting that they are initially responsible for creating subjects whose potential is limited.

Not surprisingly, then, high school teaches "type-ical" learning, and high school is not strictly a school, but any place where one learns how to behave formally, or in accordance to the "polite murder society," as it is called in Toulouse Lautrec. The father takes on all identities of importance to Janey, and indeed he represents all institutional representations of importance to her, from entertainment to economics. Her artwork while in high school--depicting women with penises, women fondling

penises, phallic structures--suggests the phallic domination of institutional thought. As for her own body, it must be rejected. Janey's sole drawing of a female is an enlargement of a vagina with the label "My cunt red ugh" (BG 19). The school, then, is the place where women learn to internalize mythic logic. Acker strives to free women from that logic by taking Janey through an altered curriculum that insists she know her body. For example, Janey endures sexual abuse, undergoes an abortion, translates Persian poems about her cunt, and survives cancer. Acker's new curriculum in Blood and Guts in High School is similar in design to the new murderess she attempts to create in The Black Tarantula, the difference being the emphasis on the schooling rather than the schooled.

In the end, however, to free herself from high school, Janey must take flights away from institutions. Blood and Guts in High School concludes with a section entitled "A journey to the end of night." Acker tries to make this journey work by constantly shifting its destination to various exotic, unspoiled locales, such as Tangier, and, finally, in Janey's dreams. However, she still finds herself retreating to the mythic logic of purity--Janey dies as a sacrifice so that many other Janey's can repopulate the earth.

Despite her attempts to adapt her plagiarizing strategy to institutions, Blood and Guts in High School comes across

as a grand failure--it tries to do too much, and by so doing accomplishes very little. Acker concedes as much when she describes its primary accomplishment as its ability to start "really using plagiarism, with the Genet stuff" (HL 10) at the end of the novel. She comes to believe that the best journey away from mythic logic can be made by pirating a mythic text and concentrating on plagiarizing the institutions that inform it. The image of the "pirate," the taker of transgressive voyages, a figure both literally and figuratively on the margins of the world, becomes increasingly important to Acker as she concentrates on violating the institutional behavior codes of culture.

Great Expectations<sup>40</sup> continues Acker's interest in pirating a text. It is her first "stolen" title, and this theft links the text to its narrative past while insisting it will not be passive in the face of that past. In fact, Great Expectations steals not only its title but also the expectations that title suggests, shifting them from the progress Pip must conceptualize in order to earn his place in society to the irrational, disjointed journey Acker's protagonists must take in order to gain recognition in theirs. At the end of Blood and Guts in High School, Acker proposes a romantic view of recreating journeys. In Great Expectations, she seems to realize that this recreation can only work to remodel identity after the ideology of "romance" has been plagiarized. The romance novel is the

high school of Great Expectations, from which her characters must unfind their way.

To some extent, the first section of Great Expectations, entitled "Plagiarism," sets down the initial strategy of plagiarism through which Acker's protagonists must find their way. This strategy is transgressive--it attempts to break historical expectations by violating a supposedly proper and integral origin. Indeed, the first two paragraphs of Acker's Great Expectations are stolen from Dickens', with only the substitution of the name "Peter" for "Pip" in the Acker text. This substitution works to suggest how romance begins with "peter" logic while at the same time it violates the "peter" logic by inserting a new element into it in order to gain access into the dominant narrative. The name gained, "Peter," suggests the relationship between identity, physical procreation, and property and authority under mythic logic. The violence of the theft, the plagiarism, is inextricably linked to sex, or the violence of making an identity. This entire process is bound in the romance narrative. Since Peter gets the authority for his name from the combined influences of a tombstone and his sister, that authority is both steeped in tradition (carrying with it the inscription of the past) and traditionally engendered (at least to the extent that it is a family member, and a substitute mother, who provides the assurance for the name).

However, it is also significant that Peter's sister is a substitute mother and that she had her own name effaced, as she is now known as Mrs. Joe Gargery. She has had a male name imposed over her own and gets this name only because she has acceded to a tradition that works, as Luce Irigaray puts it, "to eradicate the difference between the sexes in systems that are self-representative of a 'masculine subject.'"<sup>41</sup> The romantic journey Pip in Great Expectations is to undergo is replete with such systems that efface the feminine. These are the systems Acker hopes her journey can unrecognize. To some extent, then, the violence of Acker's plagiarism can be seen as a response to a violence that preceded it. However, Acker's journey hopes to do away with the game of finding origins and assigning values and blame, since such tasks rely on binary distinctions that buttress the dominant narrative and can only lead to replacement narratives that bring with them their own forms of oppression. Thus, she complicates both the normative and disruptive sense of her text.

For example, beneath the section title "Plagiarism" is the chapter title "I Recall My childhood," under which are the plagiarized paragraphs from Dickens. The word "childhood" looks back to the past from which Acker borrowed this textual "childhood," while also suggesting that all texts have recollected childhoods that are "plagiarisms" in this sense. Of course, "I Recall My Childhood " also

describes what Acker's protagonist does. Complicating this title further is the possibility that the plagiarized childhood referred to in the paragraph may be either the childhood of Peter the usurper, who steals his way into the Dickensian text, or Peter the usurped, who may be, like Mrs. Joe, burdened with the male name (a possibility made even more pronounced when in the subsequent paragraph the protagonist's voice is female).

In this context, it is important to recall that "Pip" is not the "real" name of Dickens' protagonist. It derives from his childish mispronunciation of "Philip Pirrup," and yet it is also a name forced upon him, in a sense: when he receives his great expectations, one of the conditions is that he keep this childish nickname. Thus, the suggestion that the violence of the name, here related to the violence of identity, goes deep into the cultural systems through which we realize our expectations, and that while these systems are complex enough for us never to be able to know them (as Pip was not to know Magwich), they are simple enough for us to recognize them as indispensable to our expectations.

This seeming contradiction is the genesis of Great Expectations, as Acker made clear when she explained how she approached the novel's production:

I thought that I didn't need a centralized plot or centralized characters . . . so I started doing my own version of Great Expectations, cutting it up, not even rewriting, just taking it and putting it

together again, like playing with building blocks.  
(HL 15-16)

Because of the novel's decentralization, plot structure is not an adequate measure of its development. Acker believes that the linear plot needs to be unwoven because it concentrates on building toward a conclusion that inevitably reinscribes the dominant narrative. Accordingly, she emphasizes internal repetitions that forestall that inevitable ending, and she concentrates on the way fragmented, isolated desires are formed and resolved. These desires can make hers a plagiarized journey, one that moves to undo what linear narrative does--or at least seems to do when its violence goes unrecognized, seeming to peter out into romance and myth. The image of this undoing is that of the "peter" repenetrating the text. It is developed both as Acker plagiarizes the source text, violating it in the way it has historically violated subjects, hoping to inform it anew, as she examines how rich texts have penetrated human lives, constantly reinforming us and creating us "anew" within changing patriarchal paradigms.

Beginning by assuming the prevalence of Freudian fathers, Acker suggests that since women have been spoon-fed the Oedipal myth, their past is a plagiarized past. This is represented at the start of Great Expectations by the death of mothers: "On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide and in September of 1979 my grandmother (on my mother's side) died" (GE 5). Subsequently, Peter narrating



Great Expectations gives way to a generic female narrator whose female origins have died and whose important questions for the future revolve around love and future boyfriends. This narrator seeks out a male, Terence the seer (reminiscent of Tiresias), to help her uncover her identity. He tells her that the image of her mother is "blocking consciousness"; in other words, that an image of femininity prevents her proper development of femininity. This is the logic of romance, and, under its auspices, regardless of what journey one undergoes, one goes as a male subject. Terence, then, is a punk Freud with Tarot cards. His influence can be seen in many of the depictions of women at the beginning of the text, as in this reflection by the narrator upon her dead mother:

Because I am hating my mother I am separating women into virgins or whores rather than believing I can be fertile.

I have no idea how to begin to forgive someone much less my mother. I have not idea where to begin: repression's impossible because it's stupid and I'm a materialist. (GE 6)

This Freudian hodgepodge operates as mythic "natural" reasoning and blocks the possibility for growth in women by making women seem inadequate by natural reason. The deleterious effect of this logic can be seen in Acker's images of women held by women. For instance, in her next description of mothers, the narrator begins by recognizing superficial values allotted them--and then gradually proceeds to transmogrify them:

My mother is the most beautiful woman in the world. She has black hair, green eyes which turn grey or brown according to her mood or the drugs she's on at the moment, the pallor of this pink emphasizes the fullness of her lips, skin so soft the color of their cheeks is absolutely peach no abrasions no redness no white tightness. This in no way describes the delicacy of the face's bone structure. Her body is equally exquisite, but on the plump side because she doesn't do any exercise and she wears girdles. She's five feet six inches tall. She usually weighs 120 pounds even though she's always taking diet pills. Her breasts look larger and fuller than they are because they sag downwards. The nipples in them are large pale pink. In the skin around the nipples and in the tops of her legs you can easily see the varicose veins breaking through. The breast stomach and upper thigh skin is very pale white. There's lots of curly hair around her cunt.

She has a small waist hands and ankles. The main weight, the thrust, the fullness of those breasts is deceptive, is the thighs: large pockmarked flesh indicates a heavy ass extra flesh at the sides of the thighs. The flesh directly above the cunt seems paler than it has to be. So pale, it's on the edge of ugliness . . . (GE 9)

By recognizing the cultural value allotted them, women come to recognize ugliness. But while ordinarily this ugliness is internalized and reapplied to the woman's body as judgement, Acker hopes to expand the ugliness into critique. Thus, Acker's prose borders on the "edge of ugliness." In fact, it strives for it. Kathleen Hulley observes of Acker's prose, "It surpasses the obscene. This is language scraping as close as possible to an unspeakable, and obliterating 'Real'" (173).<sup>42</sup>

Hulley finds Acker's prose voicing an "unspoken" culture, which, according to Hulley, "shows the workings of a disingenuous narrative strategy which supports the

prevailing distributions of power" (TG 176). However, I think it is more accurate to say that Acker's texts take the propriety of culture, which shows itself in formal categories such as "art" and "literature," and exposes those proprieties as masking something vile and ugly, not the body of woman, but the expectations around it that reduce it to a slab of flesh. As she does with the description above, Acker hopes to take the master narrative's great expectations of that body along a course they do not ordinarily follow, to and beyond the "edge of ugliness." This is Acker's second mode of plagiarism--a remapping--the charting of an unjourney that attempts to deconstruct "ugly" institutions of representation by articulating the unspoken regions of desire.

In these unspoken areas of desire Acker hopes to open up a new territory in which the female body can operate more free of patriarchal expectations. Cixous advocates a similar course with a similar metaphor in "Laugh of the Medusa" when she tells woman to write in order to "give her back her goods, her pleasures, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal" and "tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty" (LM 880). (Cixous's use of the verb "tear" also anticipates the violence of Acker's plagiarisms.) Together they share a belief that such violence reflects a truer history of women

experiencing their place within a patriarchal hierarchy. As previously noted, one of Acker's central examples is the "mother" figure, a figure whose history in narrative she sees as fragmented and always plagiarized, coming to her from diverse but predominantly patriarchal scripts that keep her under the yoke of the "Father." Thus, Great Expectations consists of numerous narratives of women broken by men's great expectations. It challenges the narrative continuity of one masculine paradigm succeeding another not by developing its own narrative continuity but by continuously critiquing the narratives that have seemed continuous, and have thus become "history."

Acker's text does not seek to resolve its fragments. According to Acker, closure is masculine. Therefore, her writing reworks fragments, making them seem inadequate as explanations for the types they ostensibly describe. For example, in Great Expectations the mother image remains as fractured as the narrative, but in the unjourney these fragments come to represent a "whole" woman. This is reflected in Acker's narrative style, which fractures the female narrator, suggesting (once again in the words of Cixous) that "if [woman] is a whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble" (LM 889). In Acker's text, this change takes the mother image through a new plagiarized history, an unjourney, that acknowledges the

domain of patriarchal narrative history while hoping to topple that dominance by twisting it until "the whole world and consciousness revolves around [the] mother" (GE 14).

Male characters are also presented as types, but far from being "changing ensembles," they are presented as stagnant caricatures. Their identity taints the "childhood" world of the narrator, the world forged by the dominant narrative, with a bestial, ugly, and relentlessly devouring degradation:

At camp: males string up tents along a trench filled with muck: slush from meat refuse vomit sparkle under arching colorless weeds . . . two males tie the animals to the rear of tents, a shit-filled-assed teenager squatting over the salt-eroded weeds pants dust covers his face his head rolls vacantly around his shoulders his purple eye scrutinizes the montage of tents, a brown curly-haired soldier whose cheeks cause they're crammed full of black meat are actually touching his pock-marked earlobes crouches down next to a little girl he touches her nape his hand crawls under the rags around her throat feels her tits her armpits: the little girl closes her eyes her fingers touch the soldier's grapejuice-smeared wrist, from the shit-heaps a wind-gust lifts up the bits of film and sex mag pages the soldiers tore up while they were shitting clenched the shit burns the muscles twisted by rape. (GE 11)

So all of the "children" in the "I Recall My Childhood" section of Great Expectations, males and females alike, have been formed by a plagiarized past. This commonality is one reason why generic designations, such as "mother," "father," "soldier," are favored over proper names. For example, the couple (for want of a better term) described in the rape scene above are referred to throughout the section as "young

girl" and "brownhaired." All "types" need to go through an unjourney, but the male types are more resistant, having reaped (and raped) the benefits of thousands of years of patriarchal order.

The disparity suggested above leads to a conflict between "types." This conflict is what men and women must work through to attain their expectations; it is explored by Acker in a section entitled, appropriately enough, "I Journey to Receive My Fortune." The following dialogue between "Hubbie" and "Wife" illustrates how the subjects are mediated through cliched representations of femininity and masculinity:

WIFE: You louse! You lousy louse! Mother always said you were a louse and, besides, she has more money than you! I don't know why I married you I certainly didn't marry you for your money.

(Starts to sob)

HUBBIE: Stop it, dear. (Doesn't know what to do when he sees a woman crying. It makes him feel so helpless.) The children'll see and think something's the matter. (GE 20)

Here, the mythic logic is obviously intact: the husband is challenged on the grounds that he is not fulfilling his role as breadwinner, and he tries to calm his wife's hysterics with reason. The scenario has the characters and feel of that modern source of myth, the TV situation comedy of the 1950's: nagging wife, befuddled husband, the threat of an overbearing mother-in-law. This scenario is so familiar to us that we expect the comedic resolution that reinforces the values of the American

family. However, Acker gradually twists the character's responses, leading to a mix of sit-com and political rhetoric:

HUBBIE: It's always my fault. Everything's always my fault. When your dog dies when you were four years old it was my fault. When Three Mile island was leaking away Mother threw out her new General Electric Microwave cause she said it was a UFO Martian breeding ground: I caused that one. Your commie actor friends're telling me I'm not political enough cause I won't stand on street corners and look like a bum just to hand out that rag (SEMIOTEXT(e)) they call a newspaper that a bum wouldn't even use to wipe his ass with, some communism, and then they say I'm responsible for the general state of affairs. All I do is work every day! I never say anything about anything! I do exactly what every other American middle-aged man does. Everything's my fault.  
WIFE: (soberly): Everything IS your fault. (The wife starts to cry again.) (GE 20)

Here, the husband's speech combines exaggerated and contrived comedic references with bigotry and earnest politics to the point where one is not so relaxed about or familiar with the result. After all, it is easy to ridicule 1950's sit-coms as "unreal," but Acker is concerned to make a more complex criticism. These "types" suddenly recognize and allude to a disparate array of references that defy the frame of sit-com simplicity. Thus, the wife's rejoinder about her husband's culpability may be a retreat to a cliched sit-com stock phrase, or it may be Acker's plagiarism of that stock phrase, giving it new vitality as a censure of patriarchal logic, which in fact implicates "every American middle-aged man." The recognizable response

becomes complicated to expose the dimensions of rhetorical possibility kept contained by stereotype simplicity.

Acker resolves her domestic dispute in a manner that cross-channels the simplicity of a sit-com resolution with the violence and indeterminacy of postmodern existence:

HUBBIE: Bam. (Shoots down a four-year-old girl who's wearing a baby-blue jumper. Her junked-out mother is too shocked to scream. It begins to snow.) Guess it's gonna snow for Christmas.  
WIFE: Oooh, I'm so glad! Now aren't you glad you stayed home for Christmas? (GE 22)

The dialogue is disjointed, the logic tenuous, and the subject matter undisciplined. (Where do the girl and her junked-out mother fit in?). Nevertheless, the story has the form of a happy ending for the principals; but after the dialogue ends, the narrator asks the rhetorical questions, "Is there anything else? What is to know?" (GE 23).

Certainly, it seems to us that the romantic resolution, the snow job, cannot efface the violence, of both substance and form, that preceded it. A harmony beyond the local harmony of the principle is lacking. But this lack is the state of mythic logic Acker has been addressing all along in her argument, that master narratives, with all their violence, have been "snowing" us into believing in the naturalness of romantic resolutions.

"Hubbie" and "Wife" are types used to demonstrate the difficulty of communicating in a world where stereotype responses are the matrix of personal responses. To provide



additional context for this difficulty, Acker also depicts character types struggling even to recognize their "own" identities enough to communicate with "others." For example, the character Rosa is to the historical feminine what Peter is to the historical masculine. The very name, "Rosa," by its suggestion of the rose, is synonymous with femininity. Yet, the rose suggests a femininity whose standing is problematic.

In Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis observes how the term "rose" loses as much meaning as it supplies:

the very term "rose" . . . is so dense with literary allusions, references, and connotations that it no longer has any, and thus appears to refer to what Baudrillard has called the implosion of meaning: a rose is a rose is a black hole, as it were.<sup>43</sup>

A rose as a black hole describes Acker's plagiarizing task. A black hole is so dense as to defy conventional thought and imagination. A rose as a black hole can then describe woman as the "lack" that has been historically excluded, lost, super-imposed upon to oblivion--in short, violated. This description, then, acknowledges a woman's historical identity, but an identity that tells her, in Cixous's words, "Dark is dangerous" (LM 878). At the same time, it alludes to woman's potential to defy explanation within a male economy. Rosa, then, represents a femininity filtered through mythic logic, but trying to explode that logic as a way of opening up other definitions for herself. In her letters we see how the feminine has been framed within

patriarchal meaning-making myths, as when she writes to Peter about his new girlfriend:

What you don't know is that this cunt contains lots of poisons . . . especially one lethal poison developed by the late Fu Manchu that takes cocks, turns their upper halves purple, their lower parts bright red, the eyes go blind so they can no longer see what's happening, the person dies. (GE 25)

Her body, the dark area termed "cunt," is dangerous, presided over by a man, and threatening to a man unless saved, cured. This myth of the castrating female is juxtaposed to the brazen Rosa of desire who writes to Peter, "I want you wet. I want you dripping all over me. I want you just for sex" (GE 26). Here, she is a disposable boy toy. These hyperbolic extremes call attention to the space between them, the space Acker hopes to make us unknow.

Thus, Rosa as the historically plagiarized woman can also be Rosa as woman-in-the-making. The emphasis on verbs here suggests Acker's affinity for Deleuze as well as her striking similarity to Cixous. Rosa's selection of letters, full of feminine posturing, written to various people (predominantly male), and covering a range of topics as diverse as Italian terrorism and the similarities between Moby Dick and Nazism, are at once a chronicle of the "hysterical" woman groping for her place within the master narrative and a reworking of that narrative, in which the "hysterical" female becomes the narrator of Great Expectations.

Trying to ensure that this plagiarism, which makes even violence a convention, will not be reduced to a schematic, Acker alters degrees of irony in her pastiche. For example, when Rosa asks God, the acme of masculine authority, for "a man who could put [her] back in touch with the world" (GE 30), the text responds by entangling her in a plagiarism of The Story of O. This response is ironic, demonstrating how man has historically put woman "back in touch" through obedience, subservience, and humiliation; but it is also sincere, aligning the female with a text that takes as its focus the issue of feminine engendering. Making feminine engendering the result of a plea to God is an unknowing of the enlightenment one finds in Christian enlightenment, which concentrates, as its first commandment attests, to the love of the Lord, the Father.

In fact, the designation of "O" as female comes close to quantifying the woman's power in a patriarchal narrative; contrarily, "O" as a figure of completeness represents a patriarchal trope valuing natural virtue, as in, for example, mother nature or the Virgin Mary. These boundaries-in-opposition are similar to those recognized by Peter and Rosa, Hubbie and Wife, and all the types of Acker's text. They create for O "this identity [that] doesn't exist" (GE 44), which mythic logic painfully reinforces, but which plagiarism hopes to redefine as potential. Knowing the pain, realizing the violation,

becomes unknowing the identity. O's nightmare is that "her body mirrors/becomes her father's desire" (GE 54); rejecting the body that reflects this desire, this mirror image of femininity, can dissolve the chains (in O's case both real and metaphorical) by which she is bound.

However, should Acker restructure the narrative to allow for such a rejection, she would violate her own tenets by falling into the trap of a romantic resolution. Thus, O's story ends addressing the problem of what such a rejection would entail within the practical terms of the patriarchal economy: "O had to either deny her father's sex and have no father or fuck her father and have a father" (GE 54). The story does not move toward recuperation but away from it and away from the rationality that creates resolutions. The task becomes how to unknow; as the narrator asks, "How can I talk about ignorance, what ignorance unknowing is?" (GE 54).

As she has tested working solutions in previous novels, Acker talks about "unknowing" by testing it against literary forms to see if it is viable as a solution to the problems of institutional identity. One of her great expectations is to be able to talk about what ignorance unknowing is. Her attempts to do just that rely on forms we recognize, such as nineteenth-century romance novels, of which Dickens's Great Expectations is a good example. These novels are especially suitable because they chronicle the rise of the middle

class, and it is when the middle class assumes prominence and becomes educated that the institutionalization of identity undergoes a particularly modern crisis. The more people relying on the institution of education, relative to the family or church, to educate them in culture, to help them realize their identities, the more important for that institution to churn out "proper" subjects.<sup>44</sup>

At the beginning of section two, "The Beginnings of Romance," the narrator suggests that "a narrative is an emotional moving." She makes this claim since romantic narratives typically move toward emotionally satisfying resolutions. Thus, the problem of the two endings in Dickens's Great Expectations.) They give the reader a sense of a journey completed, desire fulfilled, and culture affirmed, all with a sense of propriety. Since we as subjects do tend to accept the "naturalness" of these resolutions, Acker's narrator concludes that "self-reflective consciousness is narrational" (GE 58). The point here is to suggest how the emotions that make an ending "feel right" are a part of the rationality of culture. However, since self-reflective consciousness is narrational and a narrative is an emotional moving, then self-reflective consciousness is also irrational.

When Acker presents her beginnings of romance, she tries to force this awareness upon her readers. For example, the narrator's own insistence on her self-

reflective consciousness, a rational mode, is challenged by the contradictory assertion that she "lived in [her] imaginings" (GE 59), a fanciful mode. Ostensibly critiquing education, the narrator responds to a charge that she sees the world too much in black and white terms by saying, "I get A's in school" (GE 59). Far from suggesting that such responses should cancel each other out, Acker contends that they are "natural," that they are behind any rationality that can homogenize radically different texts and peoples into a culture. Thus, it is quite "natural" that in the section entitled "The Beginnings of Romance" the narrator laments, "All my life is endings" (GE 64).

Acker increases our awareness of these natural contradictions by overloading her text with them. The most striking example of this tactic occurs in the following passage, in which, after insisting on narrative authority by linking it to rational self-consciousness, the narrator derides the narrative function:

I'm going to tell you something. The author of the work you are now reading is a scared little shit. She's frightened, forget what her life's like, scared out of her wits, she doesn't believe what she believes so she follows anyone. A dog. She doesn't know a goddam thing she's too scared to know what love is she has no idea what money is she runs away from anyone so anything she's writing is just un-knowledge. Plus she doesn't have the guts to entertain an audience. She should put lots of porn in the book cunts dripping big as Empire State buildings in front of your nose and then cowboy violence: nothing makes any sense anyway. and she says I'm an ass cause I want to please. What'm I going to do? Teach? (GE 70-71)

The contradictions are numerous. First of all, the narrator undermines her own credibility. Second, the style of the passage attacks the more general narrative claim to rationality through its hysterics, exaggeration, and self-contradictions (e.g., "she doesn't believe what she believes"). Third, its own humorous style belies its accusation that the author cannot entertain. Fourth, it contradicts itself formally by suggesting that the author is too gutless to put "lots of porn" and "cowboy violence" into the novel when, by conventional standards, it is replete with both.

The final contradiction concerns the intrusive "voice" itself. Is this speaking voice an absurdity of patriarchal narrative, advocating a more conventional "violence" and "pornography," which Acker's text hopes to expose? If so, its own hysterical, "feminine," style seems to belie the task. Is it a radical critic, suggesting that the text does not go far enough to discredit conventional narrative, that it has become reappropriated and needs to be even more radical? Should this be the case, it contradicts its claim by subscribing to mythic claims of entertainment--"violence" and "sex"--and denouncing the process, "unknowledge," that has turned those modes against the patriarchy. Of course, "un-knowledge" might be what a radical thinker believes conventional knowledge is within a conventional novel, and, in that case, the critique takes yet another turn--but still

without bringing us to a conclusion. The point here is that these questions are bound to become annoying long before they become exhausted. To bring them up serves only to illustrate how much easier it is to accept the myth that diverse and seemingly contradictory claims may be resolved within a "rational culture" than rigorously to pursue that imaginary resolution.

Acker's awareness of this expediency in reason extends to a recognition of difficulties within her own critique. She recognizes that any removal from the text, the culture, a removal ostensibly made by the "I" who is going to tell you something apart from the text, is never possible because it attempts to occupy the unoccupiable position of transcendental authority. Thus, the possibility for unknowledge does not lie in advancing it as doctrine, but in calling to mind, however laboriously, the complex conditions that make any knowledge or perspective possible. Acker's plagiarism thus tries to mimic cultural conditions by reworking a theme or point through until you feel it as well as recognize it, and then by reworking it again, constantly emphasizing recognition over resolution. For example, after the passage cited above, the "Author," responds, referring to itself as "me," a "me" somehow beyond the text; and then this author is displaced by a third person "Author," "he," who speaks from another plagiarized source text, Melville's Redburn, also attempting to occupy a position outside the



text of Great Expectations. We are to recognize that we are receiving authority even as that authority ironically subsumes itself by demonstrating that one of our great expectations is always to move out of expectations into the realization of "truth."

Acker examines these supposed realizations in fragments she terms "Historical Examples." In these examples, characters move anachronistically between twentieth-century America and the eighteenth-century French court. But instead of finding complications from such a move, the characters find solutions. For instance, one female artist learns that "purity comes from lies or impurity" (GE 80). In other words, regardless of the particular era or culture one is in, contradiction is the rule for understanding. Contradiction becomes the evidence for culture rather than a problem within culture. Thus, Acker's historical examples emphasize how easily "history" forces differences into identity.<sup>45</sup>

The final section of Great Expectations is entitled "The End," but of course the end of this text cannot simply meet the great expectations of an ending. Thus, "The End" is just as much about beginnings and, therefore, once again calls forth that space of violence between extremes from which Acker draws the possibilities for plagiaristic change. Throughout her novels, the extremes--repressed within "historical examples"--recall what is for her the primal

division between legitimate and illegitimate texts, or between texts presumed to be original and others presumed to be inferior copies or distortions of these.

So "The End" is a history lesson--both in the sense of history as the end of identity and in the sense of history as a beginning for plagiarized identity. In Acker's terms, it is a lesson about "what ignorance unknowing is." The lesson begins with a subject, an unspecified "I," caught in the middle of "this isness which is", which also "isn't the situation" (GE 103). This set of conditions has historically been taught to be encompassed by culture. In fact, the speaker demands that these "shades" and "hues, which are "never either-or," "come out" (BT 103), a demand made in the spirit of reconciliation.

However, this demand is answered by a chronology of important dates leading to the advent of the Roman Empire. The chronology is similar to a study guide and the empire can be seen as an image of the inscription of western narrative fulfilled, of mythic logic institutionalized. Thus, Acker explains it as a convergence of diverse discourses into a single power discourse:

29 B.C. Empire begins. Centralization of power which is thought. Any non-political action such as poetry goes against centralization. Ovid is exiled. Propertius and Horace are told they have to write praises of the empire. (GE 104)

This sparse, terse abstract exemplifies institutional thought as it describes its operation. The utilitarian

prose, the chronicle of dates, we recognize as a form of education. We learn from history and this is the form of history; it carries with it its own authority. But in Acker's history lesson this form must be plagiarized, turned into one of her chronologically distorting fragments of desire. Acker accomplishes this by having Propertius emerge from the timeline to become a type in Acker's "End."

The emergence of Propertius (whose "proper" name establishes him as a patriarchal type) as a character is one way "The End" is a beginning. He is history reworked. His involvement with his twentieth-century girlfriend, Cynthia, in a constant debate over sex, is representative not only of the beginning of the physical subject but of the subject in ideology.

In effect, their debate is a lesson about subjecthood. In it the end is imaged as a door. Throughout the course of this section, individual chapters, such as "To the Door" and "At the Door's Edge," mark progress to this hypothetical door, which serves as both entrance and exit. As entrance, the chapters work to suggest the creation of a new subject, each chapter ending closer to a description of copulation. As exit, the chapters work to suggest the end of masculine domination of ideology, each chapter elaborating on Cynthia's increasing influence over Propertius.

However, this progress is also a regression, detailing the removal of the female by her entrance into the

subjecthood of the masculine narrative, which has historically "fucked" with her identity. Thus, the chapter "Inside" begins, "Now we're fucking" (GE 113) and proceeds to describe how such fucking subjugates the female before the phallus. For example, the narrator addresses her lover's body:

Thumb, your two fingers pinch my nipples while your master bears down on me. Red eyes, stare down on top of my eyes. Cock, my eyes are staring at you, pull out of the brown hairs. Red eyes, now you're watching your cock pull out of the strange brown hairs. Thumb, your two fingers pinch my nipples while your master bears down on me. (GE 114)

All attention here is drawn toward the phallus until it virtually becomes the master that bears down on the female's identity.

However, this same title, "Inside," also refers to the inside of the woman; and if this inside has been affected by Acker's plagiarized text, as her lesson plan intends, it may not simply be the place of the male projection of femininity. This fucking, then, is the exit of the "male-identified" female and the creation, the placing in the womb, of a nascent female identity. The metaphor "fucking" works literally between characters in the text and figuratively by fucking the text's reputed origins--appropriating them, and in that appropriation fucking the "praises of the empire" Propertius is supposed to engender by applying them disruptively.

Disruption means reapplying violation. The narrator complains, "Why can't you ever once do something that's not allowable?" (GE 113). This complaint develops the idea of unknowing, part of which involves resubmitting the violence into the narrative to make it work against female oppression. This goal requires violating all the rules of "propriety" that in effect have contributed to oppression. Thus, the narrator demands to be hit, pleads to have someone "sow this hideousness opposition blood to everyone proud," screams that "the streets made themselves for us to walk naked down them take out your cock and piss over me," and concludes that "the threshold is here" and that we would "commit ourselves to not knowing" (GE 113).

However, again to avoid slipping into the trap of romantic resolution, the signs of a new beginning meet the interference of forms of plagiarism that still do sing the "praises of the empire." These narrative fragments work to stabilize the disruptive voice, rendering the "beginnings" impotent by reclaiming them within an arcane form. For example, when we next see Cynthia, she is in the Roman Whore's bathhouse, telling her absent lover she wants him, like her, "to learn what it is to be uncertain" (GE 115). In other words the transgressive fucking that spawned a new beginning has been reclaimed--it leaves the narrator of one fragment "physically sick" and leads Propertius to decide that "he doesn't want to fuck Cynthia again" (GE 116).

Cynthia and Propertius's relationship degenerates until, as in a degenerate Darwinian return, they are depicted as dogs, and Cynthia "barks" her lamentations.

As previously noted, this degeneration is also played out imagistically in the depiction of the door. Seeking out Propertius, Cynthia sits in front of his closed door. Thus, she finds herself shut out in her attempt to "redefine the realms of sex" (GE 118). She is reduced to a suicidal madness, the old-plagiarized condition of the hysterical female, dead except as a male-image. From this position of madness, she states, "I am only an obsession. Don't talk to me otherwise. Don't know me. Do you think I exist?" (GE 119). While the door remains closed, the answer is negative.

However, to use an image she would appreciate, Acker leaves a crack in the door open. Cynthia's final madness can also be affirmative, like that which Douglas Shield Dix has seen in Acker's Don Quixote. He explains, "It [uses] a language based on her individual visions: it is the language of this text, which strives to communicate her reality outside of the conventions of her society. It hints at an obsession with unknowing, the continued quest to make the world revolve around the "consciousness of [the] mother."<sup>46</sup> This madness also commands that we "not know" her, which can make possible the conditions under which she can exist.

Even Propertius acknowledges this crack in the door. It is significant that he tells us that "Cynthia walked away . . . and [he] woke up" (GE 127). Her rejection of him, though only realized in a dream, eclipses the nightmare of becoming the father's desire in which O was lost in "The Beginnings of Romance." If Propertius recognizes this, his waking up may bode well for the future.

On the whole, however, very little changes from beginning to end of Great Expectations. Propertius awakes and insists to an absent Cynthia, "I don't want you, slut, because love is mad and I don't want to be mad" (GE 127). The woman is absent, voiceless, and the man is insisting on control, even of the name of her sexuality. The narrator is aware of the nearly closed loop, remarking near novel's end, "I don't know if the world is better or worse than it has been" (GE 127). The structure of the novel suggests a loop, too, ending by addressing the narrator's "Dear Mother" to infinity and so returning us to the absent mothers at the very beginning of the text. Yet there is a crack in the door, and it seems well within Acker's scheme that one must travel a great journey just to attain that small opening. Before the address to mother, Acker's narrator notes that "the only anguish comes from running away" (GE 127). This penultimate observation may strike the ultimate chord of the novel.

Acker does not run away--but her examination of identity in My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini<sup>47</sup> (another Peter, and a Paul too) grows increasingly bleak. In My Death My Life, Acker struggles more pointedly with what she calls the "givenness" of any given narrative, the authority it has by the fact that it serves as a source text. The source text is not good, bad or indifferent out of necessity; it is simply there, the interpreter of the nothing (that we know of) that preceded it. Acker explains:

How available are the (meanings of the) specifics of all that is given? Language is a givenness like all other givennesses. Let the meanings not overpowering (rigid) but rather within the contexts, like Hamlet's father's ghost who tells the first meaning, interpretations of nothing, be here. (MDML 201)

Thus, Pasolini, himself a murder victim, is like Hamlet's father's ghost, interpreting a given situation with the hope of unclouding a mystery of origins. If he can do so, in the not "rigid" context of Acker's text, then he can create a "first meaning,"--an identity not overpowered by the violence of the mythic narrative. Pasolini's goal, then, is similar to that of Peter/Pip in Great Expectations.

However, if Pasolini's hope is what is left open from the doors that end Great Expectations, they are soon to close. Acker maintains the image of the door in My Death My Life. For example, two of her major characters are the Porter from Macbeth, and Portia from The Merchant of Venice. But in My Death My Life the doors are dangerous, leading



more to morass than freedom. For example, in her plagiarism of Macbeth, the playwright intrudes:

The Play's Writer: A definition of this world's a portal. A definition, my first, of this world's AIDS. AID'S the breakdown of the body's immunity system: the body becomes allergic to itself . . . What's AIDS? A virus. A virus' [sic] seemingly unknowable who gets identity by preying on an entity, a cell. Writers whose identities depend on written language're viruses. I'm trying to break down the social immune system. Even this sentence's false. (MDML 362)

Acker envisions AIDS as a givenness of mythic culture. At the beginning of My Death My Life, Pier Paolo Pasolini proposes "nominalism" as a way of solving the mystery of his murder and thus the mystery of violence behind mythic "givenness." Acker's rationale for this advocacy of nominalism has to do with contemporary nominalists concern with principles of individuation.<sup>48</sup> Loosely defined, principles of individuation are identity conditions. These conditions are particular to individuals, the only classification that nominalists have historically accepted. For Acker, this means the possibility that the individual can work to replace one givenness with another. But as a writer who preys on written language to shape identities, Acker finds language beyond the control of the individual. Thus, nominalism's attractiveness in theory pales in practice. In My Death My Life, by her participation in language, the Play's Writer finds herself a symptom of the disease she tries to combat. Hence, her movement to the

door, her play, endangers not only herself, but the entire populace interconnected in the social immune system.

Portia, Acker's lead character in the plagiarism of The Merchant of Venice that concludes the novel, has a vision of a world with no doors: "I'm stuck. I'm stuck in this brain which defines (makes?) the world spatially and temporally. I'm stuck in these returnings. The circles, moving temporally faster, are making me nauseous. I'm stuck in my own world: I can't meet anyone new: I always know what's happening" (MDML 374). The circles Portia describes are the circle of givenness that inhibit Acker's plagiaristic project--circles of mythic source texts, such as Shakespeare, circles of moral dichotomies such as good and evil, circles of cultures that close the doors on change. By embracing deconstruction's emphasis on language, Acker writes herself into the trap of being unable to keep her novels suitably "political." Instead, she finds herself abstracting even the most brutal of realities, such as AIDS, for textual enhancement. This realization leads her to a major change of emphasis in her subsequent novels.

### Plagiarizing Myth

Acker has confessed that after moving to England, she underwent a crisis of faith. Her attempts to change culture relied on what she came to see as "art maneuvers" that carried with them an interior significance not relative to

exterior, or political, impact. The end of My Death My Life suggests that Acker has become increasingly disenchanted by the effect her works produce. She claims that while in England she was prodded into looking at her art from a new "political context." This context led her to see her previous plagiaristic tactics as disjointed, out of synch with political reality, and of no practical use. She describes what she saw as her dilemma:

By the end of Don Quixote I was doing what I had always done, taking stuff and looking at context, seeing how they worked next to passages that had a lot of political meaning in them and seeing what society meant, but the meaning wasn't clear. And it just wasn't making sense anymore. So I thought I should work toward a reformation of what would be sense. (HL 17)

This quotation describes Acker's movement away from the investigative mode of My Death My Life toward a questioning mode. When she confesses to "seeing how [things] worked in her novels through Don Quixote," she implies that she kept a scientific distance from the subject matter she addressed. While Acker was seeing how "identity" worked, or seeing how the institutions that inform identity worked, her novels exuded a certain angst about whether these investigations could disclose any useful information. As I have previously pointed out, the political intrusions in Acker's texts are designed to make them speak to an immediate political condition. Such an immediate condition Avital Ronell, for example, recalls being forced to address at a conference

when asked, "How can your abstract thinking ever lead to revolution?" (AW 138), a question she confesses personally to having to ask herself repeatedly, and a question Acker asks herself repeatedly in every text with each political intrusion. Ronnell's answer that "abstractions" can lay the foundation for the most severe persecutions follows the same logic that leads Acker to move from investigator to quester, a logic that insists that persecutions can be redressed. Hence, Acker's most recent phase has been designed to redress the historical injustices of myth. In her interview with Ellen G. Friedman, Acker describes this new direction as "constructive rather than deconstructive" (Conversation 17), and indeed all her descriptions of her latest works abound in practical terminology. At various points she has said that she is looking for a belief system "somewhere real" (Notes 35), and elsewhere that she wants to make "a kind of myth that would be applicable to [her] and [her] friends" (HL 18).

The quest image, unmistakable in Don Quixote, adds an interesting dimension to the practical approach Acker has adopted for her most recent works. It aligns practical purpose with romantic desire in a union that has not only been exposed historically as fatuous in the very text she plagiarizes, but has also been the subject of her own scathing attacks on cultural conventionalism. The seeming concession to her own worst enemy provides much of the

tension in her later novels, leading some critics to observe that the more recent books lack the sense of sexual and transgressive energy of her earlier texts.<sup>49</sup>

Don Quixote,<sup>50</sup> in particular, documents Acker's movement from investigation to quest. In part, it is an elegy to her previous modes of investigation. These modes are addressed, respectively, in the first and second chapters. At the end of the first chapter the investigation into identity is left for dead; in the second chapter, the investigation into the sources that inform identity is travelled beyond. Acker concedes that investigation inevitably leads to stagnation; as she explains to Friedman, "You can't get to a place that isn't constructed according to the phallus" (Conversation 17). This admission amounts to an acceptance of a certain degree of defeat, which is played out imagistically in her choice of protagonists--a mad quester personally undone by his/her own delusions, in the end providing only the slight possibility of inspiration to others remaining alive in a quest. Friedman observes, "In Acker's texts, the subversion is always incomplete, the remolding and transformation of textual appropriation provide only limited success . . . Acker's questers' searches for identity and a new healing myth lead to silence, death, nothingness, or reentry into the sadomasochism of patriarchal culture."<sup>51</sup> Yet, Friedman might be too pessimistic. Acker's protagonists at least

practice what they preach, and this practicing brings enough of its own reward for such protagonists to reappear from novel to novel, once again underscoring Acker's contention that overlapping is the essence of duration. Hence, Acker remains undeterred from adhering to two of her fundamental practices: one, the Irigarian idea that even if success is limited one can practice difference (even if to Acker one cannot get beyond the phallus); and, two, the Deleuzian strategy of a continual line of flight away from the nexus of political power in order to challenge that power.

In Don Quixote, the new myth Acker hopes to construct rises phoenix-like out of the ashes of the old. She runs a final, capsule test of her old strategies, working toward a rationale for abandoning them. In this way, Don Quixote follows the basic structure of her previous novels. It comes to a working solution and then tests that solution. In this case, however, the solution is to remedy the dated approach that led to previous working solutions. The test of her latest possible solution is her first attempt at working a new myth.

The first part of Don Quixote, "The Beginning of Night," is preconditioned by an "abortion." The abortion, the eclipsing of identity before it has begun, is an image of the patriarchal restriction of identity. This abortion figuratively gives birth to the character "Don Quixote," suggesting a woman is born with her identity eclipsed, that

she begins her life in a nighttime of understanding, that she is forced, like Psyche, to provide her own lamp to seek enlightenment. Otherwise, she remains a dark figure, Cixous's black territory, and she is excluded from masculine "enlightenment."

The abortion, as Friedman points out, is also an image of patriarchal construction, the start of oppression: "The woman in position on the abortion table over whom a team of doctor and nurses presides represents, in an ultimate sense, woman as constructed object" (Friedman 42). The only way to overcome the constructed identity is to "name" oneself. Don Quixote decides that "she ha[s] to name herself" (DQ 9). This renaming is similar to the project that Acker attempts through her litany of murderesses in The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula.

However, this renaming runs into familiar obstacles. Among them are compulsory heterosexuality, which Acker equates with western religion and its proclivity for sanctifying sacrifices that kill off the individuals they extol; marriage, which turns a subject into a commodity and makes a spouse worse than a "businessman;" and history, which excludes females by depicting them as a threat-- "history's opposite death" (DQ 31)--and thus restricts their political voice by making it inherently destructive. Finally, death becomes Don Quixote's last recourse. Don Quixote's elegy to herself concludes: "It's necessary to

destroy and be wrong" (DQ 37). Acker's plagiarism has demanded the destruction of mythic logic and required the transgressiveness that enables such a destruction. But here a second reading suggests that a necessary move in plagiarism is to destroy identity and be wrong about the practical consequences: in effect, making identity an issue of "death" can make it a dead issue. Such a reading is supported by Don Quixote's contention that she was "wrong to be right, to write" (DQ 36). Readers will recall how many times Acker has written a "wrong" position (both in terms of transgression and now in terms of effect) in order to reclaim identity. Hence, we have Acker's dilemma as depicted through Don Quixote: she is and must be, as Donald Shields Dix observes, "dead to the social order" in order to overcome her "night" (and be a "knight" upon her quest) (Dix 58, 60), while being dead to the social order leaves her politically vulnerable. The upshot of this chapter is that Don Quixote must find a better transgressive position, a view Acker has taken in her own textual history.

Don Quixote's move to a more effective transgressive position mirrors Acker's second plagiaristic strategy--to repenetrate institutional forms and change how they inform identity. As it was played out in Blood and Guts in High School, Great Expectations, and My Death My Life, this position began by acknowledging the historical dominance of male texts. Acker admits as much about the second part of



Don Quixote: "I realized that Don Quixote, more than any of my other books, is about appropriating male texts and that the middle part of Don Quixote is about trying to find your voice as a woman" (Conversation 13). Finding this voice involves Acker in institutional deconstruction. Dix explains it as a technique designed to "take texts from the canon of Western literature and to deconstruct them so that she is able to extenuate paradically their politically salient characteristics, simultaneously opening up the host text to the 'outside' of her social field, and opening up her own text to the outside of the aesthetic/historical fields" (Dix 58). Thus, the texts Acker plagiarizes in "The Second Part of Don Quixote: Other Texts" are male texts that easily lend themselves to institutional critique: Andrei Biely's Petersburg, Guiseppe di Lampedusa's The Leopard, and Frank Wedekind's Lulu plays are three of the more prominent.

Acker critiques these male texts as operating within the framework of the Oedipal myth. She relies on the opening section, "Russian Constructivism," to establish her precedent. In this section, Petersburg is described as the narrator's city; in fact, she speaks of being "in Peter." This framing technique is the same one Acker used in Great Expectations to locate the narrator's position as she tries to locate herself. As in the case of Rosa's letters in Great Expectations, the narrator addresses her complaints,

lamentations, and desires both for belonging and escape to the "peter" who surrounds the text.

The history of the city is explained in a section entitled "The Poems of a City." These poems are written in Latin (recalling Great Expectation's Roman time-line) in the left column of the text, with a contemporary commentary on their form and function in the right column. The Latin text gets invaded by English, and the commentary takes on more subjective concerns. One is reminded of Acker's tenet in Great Expectations that one "learns from history." Here, what one learns from history, including the history of Acker's own texts, is explained in one of her contemporary commentaries: "By repeating the past, I'm molding and transforming it, an impossible act" (DQ 48). Acker reiterates the plagiaristic task of Great Expectations--to gain a voice in textual, and thus patriarchal, history--while also re-emphasizing the contemporary difficulties of such a task--escaping the confines of phallogocentric logic while working within a phallogocentric system. When the columns merge in the conclusion to the poem--that "the imagination is will" (DQ 49)--she suggests the constructivism that her strategy of remaking myth hopes to accomplish. The same kind of constructivism is suggested when the narrator of the poems explains the task of the commentaries: "My main purpose is orgasm in the mythological past tense" (DQ 51), a purpose that proposes to

place a Deleuzian becoming amidst a patriarchal history. The concluding section of "Russian Constructivism," "Scenes of Hope and Despair," weighs the hope of orgasm within Petersburg against the despair of patriarchal domination of texts.

Thus, the narrator sets up binary oppositions--such as dark/light, inside/outside--similar to those that have dominated mythic interpretations of reality. For example, in one section she points out that theorists, such as Baudrillard, exclaim, "[O]ur language is meaningless, for meaning--any signs --are the makings of the ruling class," while countering that claim by asking, "How exactly, does my body feel pleasure?" (DQ 55). The difference implied is one of inside versus outside, between the identity formed under the aegis of culture compared to the individual responding to desires within culture. These positions are also extremes in the way that one privileges theoretical, the other practical, critiques of identity. The theoretical extreme emphasizes meaning, while the practical emphasizes feeling. Thus, these positions also represent the historical stereotyping of male and female gender attributes. Acker set up a similar dichotomy between Peter and Rosa in Great Expectations, with her design to demonstrate how inadequate such constructions are and her conclusion that we must "unknow" them. In Don Quixote, she concludes her reading of masculine texts by asking two

questions, "What's the function of darkness? Of being ignorant?" (DQ 58). These questions duplicate the test of "unknowing" Acker explored in Great Expectations.

Once again, Acker tests unknowing by following the procedure for institutional plagiarism she developed in her middle works. The section "The Leopard Memory" traces the decline of the aristocracy by following an Italian Prince through to his death. But the aristocracy is not defeated--the Prince himself contributes to the establishment of the bourgeois government that replaces him. Thus, "Nothing in the town had changed: the Prince still ruled Palermo" (DQ 61). Rationality is retained and retains with it the aristocracy of government. One both belongs to a governing body and is excluded from it. The spotted leopard memory allows for the perpetuation of this seeming contradiction. The Prince, after his death, becomes redefined by the next class as if he belonged to its culture. However, he remains a figure of interest in that culture precisely because he is seen as apart from it. Apart is a part of belonging in culture; nothing has changed.

Acker continues tracing her deconstructive history by deriding the institutions of multinational business in the chapter "Texts of Wars for Those Who Have Remained Silent" and the institutions of education in "Wedekind's Words." Yet after these deconstructions are complete, the narrator still finds the need to escape:

Now I must find others who are, like me, pirates journeying from place to place, who knowing only change and the true responsibilities that come from such knowing sing to and with each other.

Now I am going to travel. (DQ 97)

Acker finds that she cannot unknow the institutions she critiques because she remains within them as she writes. In Empire of the Senseless, her narrator Abhor voices a similar quandary:

Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prison of meaning.

But this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, she seeks out a practice of writing that can remove her as much as possible from the representational modes that restrict her.

This practice becomes remythologizing; in it, Acker attempts to rewrite myths with an emphasis on redressing patriarchal biases. At the end of Don Quixote, and continuing in Empire of the Senseless and In Memorium to Identity, that is exactly what she does. The final section of Don Quixote begins with the chapter "Don Quixote Acts." Her "acts" are practical redresses of political problems left intact by what Don Quixote calls "the failure of writing" (DQ 107). These acts are practical works designed to overcome the workings of the American government, nuclear power, heterosexuality, and various other masculine systems

and politics. The chapter begins with Don Quixote decrying the injustice of a "he" who neglects her:

"He whom I love is my eyes and heart and I'm sick when I'm not with him, but he doesn't love me. He's my eyes; he's my I's; I see by my I's; he's my sun. My son lets me see and be. Thus he's my and the A. I've said it in every book, mainly porn or poor books, I've ever written A d nauseam even in naseam, for love hurts badly. I'll say it again: without I's the I is nothing. Or without feeling the body's dead. Now, without my heart, the malicious winds're blowing about my reactionless body. They do what they want with me. The evil enchanters." (DQ 101)

Acker's play with the words "eye" and "I" suggest that her "poor" books have been seen through male eyes. She hopes to take that "I," and all the senses with which it perceives, and retrieve an I/eye that can see and react differently. Her emphasis while writing her new myth will be on the senses, senses that can experience politics, and senses that can feel the need to redress political issues. This emphasis acknowledges the historical designation of the female as full of sense--as that word connotes sensations and feelings--but lacking in sense--as it connotes knowledge. However, Acker suggests that the patriarchal myth of knowledge is crumbling (thus the inspiration for the title Empire of the Senseless, a novel that in part recounts the fall of American government).

However much Acker claims to privilege her senses, her remythologizing strategy remains meticulously crafted. For example, she discredits the contemporary political world of Don Quixote by reclassifying it as a mythic world, in an

Arthurian sense of the word. When Acker was combatting myth, she took great pains to point out how the pervasiveness of myth led to oppression. As she remythologizes, she needs to distinguish between "good" myth and "evil." Because of its phallocentricism, contemporary politics is evil myth. Hence, Acker degrades it by recasting it in Arthurian terms and making Ronald Reagan its primary evil enchanter. This recasting makes contemporary politics seem more quaint than powerful. Thus, phallocentricism becomes antidelluvian, ripe to be replaced by a new myth the way Arthurian myth gave way to what Acker sees as our insidious contemporary myths. Pointing out that today's political intrigues may well become tomorrow's romantic legends challenges the claim to strict rationality and logical necessity behind which phallocentricism shields itself. Therefore, Ronald Reagan as a principal enchanter responsible for a dog-infested New York City is "evil" and Don Quixote "good" by comparison. But this comparison is not made in the terms through which phallocentricism has thrived. Acker manipulates mythic values and turns them against the society that wrought them.

In another example of rewriting myth, Richard Nixon takes advice from "The Angel of Death," Thomas Hobbes. Their relationship is like Reagan's to Arthurian myth. Hobbes's natural philosophy of politics leads quite naturally to Nixon and his administration, an administration

that considered duplicity a function of politics and truth the political expedience emerging from lies. The materiality Hobbes hoped to inject into political philosophy becomes warped by Nixon to mean take whatever material gain you can get out of politics. The image of Nixon as a dog demonstrates the de-evolution that Acker sees as just as natural a reading of political succession as its alleged evolution.

However, Acker also implicates her own writings within this de-evolution of the natural. Hobbes explains:

I lived among rich dogs because my family was haute bourgeoisie; I was a special puppy because I was trained to think that way. I lived on the outskirts of, in the lowest part of, society because I worked a sex show; then I believed that I deserved to be shat on, that if I didn't pull myself up by non-existent bootstraps out of the muck I would die, and that I had to be very tough. I was a member of a certain group--the art world--whose members, believing that they're simultaneously society's outcasts and its myths, blow up their individual psychologies into general truths. Do these three canine identities have anything to do with each other? What meaning can such a life or voyage have? (DQ 112)

In this excerpt, details of Acker's "actual" life have been co-opted by Hobbes. She concludes that if her individual psyche can yield so easily to his, she needs to find another voyage, another journey to give it more authentic meaning. Hence, she takes a voyage, becomes like a sailor, and from this perspective attempts to reapproach her social and political concerns. In Empire of the Senseless, Acker



elaborates on the logic of voyages by describing a metaphor of the sailor:

I say that a sailor is someone who came out of poverty which was hateful. Because a sailor has spat on and shits on poverty, the sailor knows that the worst poverty is that of the heart. All good sailors espouse and live in the material simplicity which denies the poverty of the heart. Reagan's heart is empty. A sailor is a human who has traded poverty for the riches of imaginative reality. (ES 114)

By gaining the heart that the politician lacks, the sailor can respond to poverty, while the politician will be senseless to it. The sailor who trades his or her poverty for "imaginative reality" becomes a remythologizer, a maker of the myth that feels. Acker's description of this condition as one of "material simplicity" and her clichéd use of water-induced rebirths acknowledge mythic notions of purity that she previously attacked. Acker now wants to be an heir to this lineage so that she can disrupt it.

Having found a metaphor to satisfy her in that of the voyager or sailor, Acker returns in Don Quixote to examining unfeeling mythic institutions. This return is necessary because she no longer sees herself as one excluded from the machinations of these institutions. She sees herself now as an heir, and she seeks to know to what her participation in these institutions can amount. Thus, she explores heterosexuality, in a chapter of the same name, by describing transvestites dressed as Nazis pursuing each other in romantic rituals; she explores the "Female Side of

the Oedipal Myth" by describing a female child utterly ignored; and she "redreams" her schooling in a chapter entitled "An Examination of What Type of Schooling Women Really Need" by describing students in an all-girl school teaching each other to feel. Her emphasis, as she voyages back through familiar terrain, is on participation in mythic systems as a way of claiming power within them.

Acker's quester mimics the questers in the historic cycle of the quest. Even as she rebels against the mythic order, she validates her participation in it through an aggressiveness for which the quester is frequently rewarded--since the world is better off for his success.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, while Don Quixote mimics the masculine quester she also validates her own feminine senses, which for women have frequently been disguised or ignored in mythic systems.

It is Acker's design to rework the voyages of all her texts over again. The final chapter title of Don Quixote--"The Last Adventure: Until This Book Will Begin Again"--suggests as much. And Empire of the Senseless begins with a chapter entitled "Elegy for the World of Fathers," re-emphasizing Acker's concern with mythic history. This concern continues when In Memorium to Identity begins with a plagiarized biography of Rimbaud (whom Acker describes as a "poet/myth") and continues even further in Acker's plagiarism of various Faulkner novels (Faulkner created his

own southern myth in Yoknapatawpha county). In this manner, Acker's work is still following the cyclical pattern she originally intended for it.

In fact, Acker retains many of her old strategies in her new myth. The last adventure of Don Quixote includes moments of possibility where she speaks to the dogs, "her only hopes of love" (DQ 204), and moments of despair where she concedes, "Yes, I am a failure" (DQ 190). In addition to her by now customary ambivalence toward the success of her remythologizing project, she also imbeds a dream recounting the formation of the Spanish Republic within Don Quixote's dream of love. The close of the text suggests Acker has re-energized her pursuit of gender reconfiguring under the auspices of writing a new myth. Thus, Don Quixote settles into Don Quixote as the novel ends, as Acker's narrator, drunk, awakens to the world "which lay[s] before [her]" (DQ 207).

Don Quixote ends with the romance of its predecessor only slightly tarnished. Acker begins Empire of the Senseless by exploiting the hope behind the lack of tarnish. Empire is her most focused, most narrative novel. She seems to find working on a new myth congenial. This is not to say that the novel will ever find its way on the American Family Society's reading list, but to readers of Acker's earlier works it may prove uncomfortably conventional. However, Acker does focus within it the most strident of her views:

the first section recounts the death of fathers, the second describes a grand voyage away from the remnants of masculine systems, the third re-injects the intrusion of multinationals into the sailor existence. The novel ends with Abhor, its primary protagonist, questioning the success of her journey and yet hoping that "maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust" (ES 227). Acker again seems to be reloading for another novel to attempt to traverse the terrain of new myth. And, in fact, In Memorium to Identity attempts such a trek in its plagiarisms of Rimbaud's mythic sexuality and Faulkner's mythic south.

In Empire of the Senseless, Acker's remythologizing attempts to pirate a text. By her use of the word "empire," one is reminded of colonial empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the pirates who both help build them and preyed upon them. As Acker reconfigures the image of the pirate, it works for her because it keeps her away from masculine institutions and yet allows for her participation in them. Robert Siegle, for example, discusses Acker's "pirate" participation:

If theft is stealing something of value, the sailor is a criminal indeed, for she steals the whole system of value-making, empties it, and adapts to the nomadic life to which she consigns herself. Stability is to be found not in the status of intellectual or political mastery, but in the constancy of change or fluidity "like the weather" of an imaginal ecosystem.<sup>54</sup>

Siegle adroitly connects Acker's myth, her "imaginal ecosystem" to the deconstruction of patriarchal systems. However, he does not discuss the extent to which Acker reconstructs such systems through her own myth.

Such reconstruction-with-a-difference is the aim of Acker's remythologizing. She sees the need to get her concerns grounded in "history" without being ancillary to masculine interpretations of them. Acker acts on sentiments shared by other feminist writers and critics. Carol Christ, for example, writes, "The simple act of telling a woman's story from a woman's point of view is a revolutionary act. It has never been done before."<sup>55</sup> Christ is responding to what she sees as the cultural exclusion of women from anything more than a secondary role in history, fulfilling such roles as devoted daughter, loving wife, doting mother. Albert E. Stone calls such roles "familiar formulations" of womanhood that "function both as myth and ideology, for each asserts as timeless fact something which serves the immediate interest of particular groups, conspicuously men."<sup>56</sup> Acker sees her best chance of changing the formulation as changing the myth that makes it familiar.

In the cycle of the quest Acker finds a means for changing the formulation of myth. Dana Heller provides a summary of this cycle emphasizing its need for succession:

To kill and restore: the cycle of the quest equates an antagonistic process of individuation with maintaining the universal order. Competition guides the dialectic structure of the quest and

defines male heroism as an aggressive destiny achieved through exercise of physical strength. The world provides the necessary stage, a place where one may attain the ultimate boon: manhood . . . Even when characterized by rebellion against a social order, the story of masculine development privileges the concept of an aggressive libidinal drive and individuation achieved through victory over all rivals. The hero may then return to his community--which is now the better off for his having succeeded--claim his throne, and be heralded as the heir apparent. But the continuation of the life cycle demands that heroes win their laurels only to be displaced by new heroes, perhaps their sons . . . The masculine myth thus rejuvenates cultures by making room for solitary leaders to emerge, individuate from the tribe, kill their predecessors, and assume, finally, an eternal name in the perpetuation of cultural and literary paternity. (Heller 3,4)

Acker wants neither to eradicate nor replace the cycle but rather to have her questers become those heroes who can succeed (and, incidentally, make the world a better place). To do so, however, requires that they become legitimate heirs to the throne. Historically, this legitimacy has been reserved for masculine heroes, primarily due to its emphasis on violent conquest. Acker suggests the legitimacy lies more in the conquest than in the gender accomplishing it. She appropriates the notion of legitimacy by suggesting that her own narrative legitimacy arises from her "conquest" of masculine texts when she rewrites them emphasizing women's concerns. And then, of course, her narrators' survival in the violent worlds she creates legitimizes their place in literary "paternity."

Thus, when Empire of the Senseless begins with an "elegy for the world of fathers," Acker's quester Abhor can

stake a legitimate claim as its heir. The legitimacy for Acker's elegy draws on a theme already present in mythic logic--father's relinquishing power.<sup>57</sup> These texts usually emphasize the ensuing chaos, especially, as Doris Kadish observes, in degraded sexual relationships and aberrant sexual practices. Acker has seen these aberrations as norms of mythic logic--her works time and again have emphasized as much. Thus, her narrators' claims as legitimate heirs strengthens. And while the sons Kadish describes prepare for doom, and in Acker's eyes reinscribe an oppressive patriarchy, Acker's questers work to make the aberrant livable, primarily by questing with their bodies. In Angry Women Acker describes this state of affairs:

What society has done is: tried to make the search simply individual; also, label those individuals who are searching with their bodies as "weird," "evil," "freaks," "queer"--whatever words you want to use. but we could proclaim, "We're normal!" because we are normal! It's normal to love your body; it's normal to have a body; it's normal to see through the body and feel through the body. (AW 185)

Thus, in Empire of the Senseless, Acker postulates a government that feels. Under this regime (run by Algerians, Acker's long-time image of marginalized culture), she tests whether her quester can develop a social identity. She adapts the Adventure of Huckleberry Finn for this test. The character of Huck Finn is appropriate because Huck the outcast is never really an outcast. His adventures away from society teach him values of friendship and loyalty that

exceed those of the "civilized" world he hates. Thus, when he returns to that world, he, like the traditional quester, is in position to improve it, literally, as Clemens would have it, by rewriting the story of culture.

However, Acker still resists giving into romantic closure. Her version of Huck Finn casts Abhor as Jim. Just as the female dykes in I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac were part of the lower caste of dykes, Acker's female quester Abhor is a lower caste of quester. She must be rescued by the male quester, Thivia, who abuses the imprisoned Abhor during inane rescue attempts. Even in a reconfigured government, Acker sees the likely treatment of women as analogous to the treatment of an abused slave. Abhor's redemption comes when she refuses to be rescued, and, as it turns out, does not need to be rescued. The novel ends with Abhor ready to set out on her own, having escaped the prison that made her see herself as a prisoner. In The Feminization of Quest Romance, Dana G. Heller points to an increasing number of female characters in literature who step into active roles against unjust social institutions. She labels their task as a "lighting out" for new cultural myths (Heller 21). In Empire of the Senseless, Abhor lights out, but Acker seals her departure with an image more reflective of the temperament she will need to complete her quest--a rose with a dagger piercing it and the motto "Discipline and Anarchy." This paradox recognizes the



dilemma Acker faces trying while to remythologize: how to subvert without being subverted.

R.H.W. Dillard notes this dilemma particular to Acker in his review of Empire of the Senseless (Dillard 11) as does Dana Heller in her more general examination of feminine quests. To both of them it seems a question of critical viability tempered by political participation. This compromise is a fair way to assess Empire of the Senseless in which Acker builds up a government in theory only to tear it down when she tests it. At its conclusion, Abhor is left looking for the next government to help build. Indeed, the lone female figure looking for participation is a fitting way to characterize Acker's task of remythologizing, which seeks feminine input into cultural myths. If this task leaves her vulnerable to criticisms of essentialism, Acker seems willing to take on the debate. Her work suggests that woman have for too long been defined by a body that was hidden, shamed and excluded. That body must be brought out and exposed in a new "light" before what might culturally be deemed "essential" about it can be known.

### Notes

1. K. R. St. Onge, The Melancholy Anatomy of Plagiarism (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988), 9.
2. Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12, 2 (1982): 75-76.

3. Claude Levi-Strauss, The Origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: 3 (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 129. Hereafter cited in the text as Levi-Strauss.

4. A corrective perspective can be seen behind structuralists' criticism such as that of John Gardner, who contends in On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1977) that art's salient purpose is to instruct. Far less didactic than Gardner are Tzvetan Todorov and Michael McCannes, who place a premium on the telos of fiction and also appreciate works according to their perspective. See especially Todorov's The Poetics of Prose (Trans. by Richard Howard Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977) and McCannes's Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

5. Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations, (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 20. Lasch censures any author who "demolish[es] the reader's confidence in the author" (20).

6. Kathy Acker, "Devoured by Myths: An interview with Sylvere Lotringer," in Hannibal Lecter, My Father (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 7. Hereafter cited in text as HL.

7. Kathy Acker, The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973). Hereafter cited in the text as BT.

8. Alice A. Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Hereafter cited in the text as Jardine.

9. Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978); Jacques Derrida, Disseminations, Trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Signs 1, 4 (1976). Cixous's article will hereafter be cited in the text as LM.

10. Felix Guattari, for example, introduces the term "deterritorialization" to the lexicon of gender studies. With Gilles Deleuze in A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, hereafter cited in the text as D&G) Guattari elaborates on a process wherein men "deterritorialize" themselves from gender "male" and affectively take on gender "female." Hélène Cixous also alludes to mapping when she writes of the dark territories that must be explored in "The Laugh of the Medusa," and Kathleen Hulley applies such terminology directly to Acker's

texts when she writes of Acker's "uncanny recognition of the complicity between sexuality and territoriality"  
 "Transgressing Genre: Kathy Acker's Intertext,"  
Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, ed.  
 Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns  
 Hopkins, 1989), 179.

11. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited in the text as Suleiman.

12. André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 44. Hereafter cited in the text as Breton.

13. Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" Review of Contemporary Fiction 19, 3 (1989): 31. Hereafter cited in the text as Notes.

14. Here, Acker's language adds a plagiaristic twist to the terminology of André Breton, who often used the motto, "Words make love."

15. Arleen B. Dallery, "The Politics of Writing (The) Body: Écriture Féminine," Gender/Body/Knowledge, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 53. Hereafter cited in the text as Dallery.

16. Donna Wilshire discusses how "value judgements frequently attend spatial assumptions" in "The Use of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-visioning Knowledge" in Gender/Body/Knowledge, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

17. Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Bellini," Desire in Language, ed. L.S. Roudiez, trans. T. Gora, A. Jardine and L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 238.

18. For Acker, the onslaught of violence that greets the emerging identity, especially the female identity, is typical of what she calls the "oedipal society" (Notes 35). This society she represents primarily as a merging of the texts of Freud and Sade, Freud's work is appropriate because of its privileging of males and Sade's work is appropriate because privileging males politically encultures violence against females. In her interviews and her novels, for example, Acker will equate sadism and "Reaganism."

19. The use or, perhaps, over-use of the female body and its desires, particularly, though not exclusively, by the female to open up new areas of femininity, has a considerable history as well. Susan R. Bordo notes that Helena Michie in The Flesh Made Word (New York: Oxford, 1987) describes it as a feminist "inversion" of Victorian values wherein historically suppressed depictions of female appetite, of the "representational taboo" of female sexuality, have given way to graphic and lush reveries of appetite (13). In Subversive Intent, Susan Suleiman likens it to the surrealist's rejection of the unified, bourgeois, subject and obsession with the female form, which she argues led Roland Barthes, among other modern theorists, to denounce the realist novel, codified as male, in favor of a feminine text, which she describes as "synonymous with the plural, the erotic, the experimental, the new" (40). And Acker's strategy is also consistent with Luce Irigaray's advice in This Sex Which Is not One (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) concerning mimicry, that a woman resubmit herself to "'ideas' about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic . . . to reveal the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function" (76). To some degree, all these approaches acknowledge the prevalence of a patriarchal, and thereby mythic, conception of "reality" as a starting point for locating opposition against mythic reality. They rely on a logic Arleen B. Dallery attributes to Irigaray: that "we cannot leap outside phallogentrism . . . But we can practice difference" (Dallery 62). Their primary task is to maintain that difference by making it historically specific and thus making it recognizable enough to work on a phallogentric system and yet resilient enough to avoid recuperation within that system--to overcome the paradox of having difference become an expected part of the dominant code. Teresa de Lauretis discusses a similar paradox between what she calls "the rhetoric of violence" and "the violence of rhetoric" in the second chapter of Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). She concludes that only by recognizing the historical specificity of the acts of rhetoric can we see that "the representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender" (33) and so proceed to an examination of violence as engendered in representation.

20. Ellen G. Friedman, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," Review of Contemporary Fiction 19, 3 (1989): 20. Hereafter cited in the text as Conversation.

21. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21. Hereafter cited in the text as D&G.

22. Susan Stewart, Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 88. Hereafter cited in the text as Nonsense.

23. Avital Ronnell, interview with Andrea Juno in Angry Women Ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: Art Re/Search Publications, 1991), 137. Hereafter cited in the text as AW.

24. Susan Stewart provides a particularly useful examination of nostalgia in On Longing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

25. Friedrich Nietzsche brought the concept of becoming into critical prominence. In The Will to Power (ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1967), he writes about approaching nihilism: "Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the only reality" (13). Also, refer to Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on "becomings," such as "becoming animal," in A Thousand Plateaus, Cixous's women in the "process of becoming" from "The Laugh of the Medusa," and the related concern with écriture féminine emerging from the remnants of the Tel Quel group.

26. For a discussion on what is at stake for women in the relationship between science and sanity, see Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's," Socialist Review 80, 2 (1985).

27. In Limited Inc (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press), Jacques Derrida considers the historical power of the written word. He observes:

For example, writing, as a classical concept, entails predicates that have been subordinated, excluded, or held in abeyance by forces and according to necessities to be analyzed. It is those predicates (I have recalled several of them) whose force of generality, generalization, and generativity is liberated, grafted onto a "new" concept of writing that corresponds as well to what has always resisted the prior organization of forces, always constituted the residue irreducible to the dominant force organizing the hierarchy that we may refer to, in brief, as logocentric.  
(21)

Acker's "new" writing of "nature" attempts to challenge a logocentric organizing hierarchy. Her concern for the efficacy of her "plagiarism" is reflected as well in the conclusion to Derrida's essay when he questions his own ability to "counterfeit" his signature.

28. Susan R. Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault," in Gender/Body/Knowledge (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 20.

29. Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 42.

30. In Text and Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Daniel Cottom observes a similar ironic succession in Dickens's Great Expectations in which, "The world of necessity yields to the world of probability, the world of violent trauma to the world of recuperation, the world of arbitrary mastery to the world of justice. In this way we see irony as history" (111).

31. One idea Acker draws upon for her work is Nietzsche's notion of "the eternal recurrence." In The Will to Power Nietzsche writes: "Everything becomes and recurs eternally--escape is impossible!--Supposing we could judge value, what follow? The idea of recurrence as a selective principle, in the service of strength (and Barbarism!!). Ripeness of man for this idea" (545). Acker cites Nietzsche in her interview with Andrea Juno in Angry Women:

It's like Nietzsche's "Myth of Eternal Return": you can view the world without "god" as "demonic" (in which you make the "demons" or the "horrible" forces of the body). Whereas: if you simply accept the Eternal Return, then the body becomes the area of joy, and you value life and you value all the changes and all that is in flux. So, how we can [sic] institute a society where that search is both individual and collective at the same time?

What society has done is: tried to make the search simply individual; also label those individual who are searching with their bodies as "weird," "evil," "freaks," "queer"--whatever words you want to use." (185)

Acker's turn on Nietzsche is to make her narrator's the "women" "ripe" to selectively change society. They do so by taking the barbarism of society, the barbarism that labels them "freaks," and their bodies "freakish," and thus justifies oppressing them, and overcoming it through a strength that shows where the "freak" has always participated in culture.

32. Howard Felperin, Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 134.

33. Kathy Acker, I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining in Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 94. Hereafter cited in the text as NI.
34. Kathy Acker, The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec in Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 189. Hereafter cited in the text as TL.
35. Eileen O'Neill, "(Re)presentation of Eros: Exploring Female Sexual Agency" in Gender/Body Knowledge, ed. Alison M. Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 74-75.
36. Muriel Dimen, "Power, Sexuality, and Intimacy" in Gender/Body/Knowledge, ed. Alison Jagger and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 39. Hereafter cited in the text as Dimen.
37. Acker points out to Friedman that her use of the CIA in Empire of the Senseless is symbolic of how "you can't isolate yourself from the world" (17). Her use of the CIA in Toulouse Lautrec makes a related point about the world not allowing you to isolate yourself from it.
38. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32.
39. Kathy Acker, Blood and Guts in High School (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 7. Hereafter cited in the text as BG.
40. Kathy Acker, Great Expectations (New York: Grove Press, 1982). Hereafter cited in the text as GE.
41. Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is not One, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 74. Hereafter cited in the text as Irigaray.
42. Kathleen Hulley, "Transgressing Genre: Kathy Acker's Intertext" in Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 173. Hereafter cited in the text as TG.
43. Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 58.
44. This shift in cultural emphasis has not gone unnoticed. For example, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards and investigation)" in Lenin and Philosophy (trans. by Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), Louis Althusser notes:

Hence I believe I have good reasons for thinking that behind the scenes of its political Ideological State Apparatus, which occupies the front of the stage, what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number-one, i.e. as its dominant ideological State apparatus, is the educational apparatus, which has in fact replaced in its function the previously dominant ideological State apparatus, the Church. (153-54)

45. Raymond Federman observes a compressing of identity in how the historical impulse of the novel leads to stagnation: "[T]he observer is detached from his subject, stands on a fixed vantage, imposes a FRAME upon the clutter and continuity of experience, and translates a dynamic field into a system that is essentially static and geometrical." See his discussion in "Imagination as Plagiarism," New Literary History 7, 3 (1976), 568.

46. Douglas Shields Dix, "Kathy Acker's Nomad Writing," Review of Contemporary Fiction 19, 3 (1989): 61. Hereafter cited in the text as Dix.

47. Kathy Acker, My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini in Literal Madness: Three Novels by Kathy Acker (New York: Grove Press, 1987). Hereafter cited in the text as MDML.

48. I refer to Rolf A. Eberle's historical background of nominalism in Nominalist Systems (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1970), 3-10.

49. Acker concedes to giving in to the conventional when she admits about Empire of the Senseless in her interview with Lotringer to instead of "the old stuff" putting more "narrative in there" (HL 24). She re-emphasizes this concession to Friedman when she points out, "Janey Smith was more a cardboard figure. But I could sit down and have a meal with Abhor" (Conversation 17). However, by themselves, concessions to conventional forms, do not mean a sacrifice of principles; on the other hand, it is interesting to note how some "conventional" critics have come around to embrace Acker's later novels. For example, see Tom LeClair "The Lord of La Mancha and Her Abortion" in New York Times Book Review (30 November 1986) and R.H.W. Dillard's "Lessons in Eating Mind" in New York Times Book Review (16 October 1988). Hereafter cited in the text as Dillard).

50. Kathy Acker, Don Quixote (New York: Grove Press, 1986). Hereafter cited in the text as DQ.



51. Ellen G. Friedman, "'Now Eat Your Mind'": An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker" Review of Contemporary Fiction 19, 3 (1989): 44. Hereafter cited in the text as Friedman.
52. Kathy Acker, Empire of the Senseless (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 134. Hereafter cited in the text as ES.
53. Dana A. Heller details the mythic quest cycle in her introduction to The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990). Future citations of this work will be included in the text as Heller.
54. Robert Siegle, "A Sailor's Life in the Empire of the Senseless" Review of Contemporary Fiction 9, 3 (1989): 74.
55. Carol Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 7.
56. Albert E. Stone, Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 196.
57. For example, Shakespeare's King Lear is an obvious precursor. And Doris Y. Kadish points to what she calls an obsessive tendency in the nineteenth-century for novels to be founded on the premise of fathers relinquishing patriarchal authority. Kadish singles out French novels particularly and argues that much of their angst was residue from the French Revolution. Her work Politicizing Gender (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991) mirrors Acker's own interest in the French Revolution and French texts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### "NO ONE KNOWS ENOUGH": DONALD BARTHELME AND THE FRAGMENTARY AGE

'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone  
--John Donne, "The First Anniversarie"

Both advocates and detractors of Donald Barthelme's fiction agree that his work seems detached. Joyce Carol Oates suggests his writing is detached from the "imposed order" that literature is supposed to provide.<sup>1</sup> Arguing from a similar moral perspective, John Gardner writes of Barthelme: "His form is elegant, but it suggests no beauty beyond literary shape, as if workmanship were now enough, there being no real value for that workmanship to struggle toward."<sup>2</sup> And Arlen J. Hansen suggests that while Barthelme struggles, his is a struggle turned inward, and he is a primary purveyor of "The Celebration of Solipsism," as Hansen entitles his article.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, designations such as "metafictionist" and "anti-author," exercises in nomenclature into which Barthelme has been thrust, attribute to him either an aloof or a pernicious rejection of "real life" and its concerns.

All these critiques have a political edge. They suggest that to divorce literature from the supposed plenum

of social experience robs it of its ability to improve human existence, and therefore, in essence, makes it amoral.

Questions concerning amorality inevitably arise for a writer who concedes that the reality he creates is "an itself, if it's successful."<sup>4</sup> Yet many of Barthelme's advocates defend his morality. Writing in Surfiction, Jerome Klinkowitz contends that Barthelme "dismisses old and irrelevant forms which no longer fit the reality we experience, and by clever juxtapositions . . . shocks us into an understanding of what is really going on."<sup>5</sup> Alan Wilde suggests that Barthelme's investigation of the humdrum in eccentric forms ultimately serves to "render extremity more ordinary."<sup>6</sup> By their deference to experiential reality, these defenses reclaim Barthelme within the normative moral spectrum. Yet even while doing so, Wilde and Klinkowitz claim for Barthelme a morality contingent on some degree of detachment. Characterizing Barthelme among postmodern ironists, Wilde describes him and his ilk: "No longer poised juridically above the world he surveys, the postmodern ironist is, typically, involved in, though not necessarily with, that world: a part of, even though he may be apart from the other objects in, his own perceptual field" (BUK 47-48). Klinkowitz acknowledges that such a perceptual field is often specialized, conceding about Snow White, "The foremost theme of the book is words" (LD 169).

However, some of Barthelme's advocates do not in the least apologize for his alleged amorality, at least as the

measure of morality lies in tradition. In fact, they applaud Barthelme for being part of a new tradition. In an article entitled "The New Tradition in Fiction," Ronald Sukenick describes a style he calls "Bossa Nova," which he says is "an elaboration of the new tradition": "Needless to say the Bossa Nova has no plot, no story, no character, no chronological sequence, no verisimilitude, no imitation, no allegory, no symbolism, no subject matter, no 'meaning.' It resists interpretation . . . The Bossa Nova is non-representational--it represents itself."<sup>7</sup>

Sukenick finds Barthelme "very Bossa Nova," and in this sense maintains a hope that Barthelme's works improvise a reality apart from "any a priori order" (NT 44). Similarly, Thomas M. Leitch argues that Barthelme's situations "must be worth displaying on their own terms, despite their lack of purpose or implied telos."<sup>8</sup> These critics see conventional moral considerations as interfering with the artist's ability to alter morality. "Newness," to whatever degree one can have it, is essential for one to take a stab at what amounts to the writing of morality. Especially important is a break from the diction in which morality for centuries has been comfortably couched. Hence, for instance, the creation of the term "fabulator," a conflation of "fable" and "fabricator," to describe those who undertake the creation of the "new tradition."

While these critiques hinge on the degree to which Barthelme is attached to or detached from a moral perspective, they are themselves all attached to a traditional epistemological perspective: the form of dualism, in this case played out in the either/or categories of "old" and "new." "Old" can reflect Oates's concern with speaking from a consolidated political perspective, finding out how literature helps create the era it is in, or Gardner's concern with an homogenized aesthetic morality modeled, for example, after Tolstoy or in the tradition of Aristotle. "New," as Klinkowitz uses it, suggests holding a realistic perspective on a fractured postmodern politics; or "new," as Raymond Federman suggests, exposes the "fictionality of reality"<sup>9</sup> and so creates a "new" aesthetic and morality through the creation of new fiction.

As the critical work of the last twenty-five years has demonstrated, such dichotomies frequently create problematic oppositions in an epistemological sense, which, in fact cause problems in a "real life" sense, since these dichotomous mindsets permeate the criticism of literature and, by being bandied about so in discourse, have contributed to a reality in publishing that privileges one school of writers at the expense of another. Therefore, the "real life" falseness of the opposition lies in how it neatly grasps the fiction classified, consumes it, digests it, and through digestion changes it into a commodity, one

that either functions as the soil of culture or of "change," yet one that in either case becomes dogmatic ground. The end result of this commodification is a shaky ground at best, few of Barthelme's readers seem to have noticed its instability.

I propose a reading of Barthelme that dispenses with the dichotomy of old and new and considers instead the dynamics of his fiction as played out through his use of fragments. Of course, this is not to say that others have not noticed his reliance upon fragments. The narrator of "See the Moon" makes a confession that will forever be attributable to Barthelme: "Fragments are the only form I trust."<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, Oates, for example, bases her criticism of him on what she dubs his literature of fragments. Furthermore, she sees behind his works "the anxiety he himself must feel, in book after book, that his brain is all fragments" (Oates 63). There are problems with anyone attributing a narrator's stand to an author (especially a narrator so obsessed with the moon as to be himself "loony"), but I am willing to concede the point and argue that the bulk of Barthelme criticism still does not adequately appreciate his use of the fragment as a literary device.

To moralists such as Oates and Gardner, the fragment is the clever, the mocking, the uncommitted. It is the thing that calls attention to itself for itself, with no purpose

linking it to a meaningful social order. The author who writes in fragments violates an implied social contract, attempts to elude what Oates calls "the nation's spiritual condition" (Oates 63 ) in favor of an indulgence in what Gardner calls "Romantic self-love" (OMF 81). However, since such descriptions can speak of the fragment only in terms of its evasion from an assumed moral perspective, they themselves show a kind of narcissism cloaked behind a veil of public concern. In fact, this is the same type of concern that taken to one loathsome extreme has George Bush offering us a "kinder, gentler nation" in a markedly self-serving attempt to secure public office.

By comparison, to the fabulator the fragment can be the very seed of creation. Planted away from the teleological garden, it can sprout the new form, grow the real of an as yet unreal world. One of new fiction's most ardent supporters, Raymond Federman, writes of such worlds with the flair of one born to write manifestoes:

As such, fiction can no longer be reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY--an autonomous reality whose only relation with the real world is to improve that world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth. (SF 8)

This headfirst embrace of a prescriptive paradox covers in optimism what it is blind to in history: namely, how paradoxes have been behind many cultures' formulations of reality--from the strictly religious to the fiction of the

secular--and thus have been designed to "improve" the world, even the world supposedly abolished by this novel "fiction."

Despite their differences, all of the readings commented on above hinge on the idea of the "meaningful whole," which, indeed, Barthelme sees lying behind notions of community. He concentrates on how these communities are represented through literary forms and emphasizes the structures of these forms in his own versions of popular romance, fairy tale, fable, and parable. However, he points out that these structures arrange an idea of community that can be attained only by exaggerating tenuous connections, which then get normalized, in a process that Barthelme sees as vital to patriarchal culture.

In his earliest works, Barthelme comments on the mythos of patriarchal culture by inflating the literary forms that help to reinscribe it, hoping to make those forms burst into the fragments from which they derive. This postulated explosion "trashes" the equally postulated notion of the integral culture. For example, Barthelme uses an extended play on the notion of "trashing" culture throughout Snow White in an attempt to discredit patriarchal representations of community. In this way he moves "Beyond the Wasteland,"<sup>11</sup> as Raymond Olderman entitles his discussion of the American novel of the sixties, by taking the by now familiar tenets of the waste land myth and exposing them as



yet another form serving to perpetuate patriarchal succession.

Obviously, the notion of the recognizable whole is vital to Barthelme's fiction, since he frequently relies on forms such as myths, fables and parables as models for his fiction even as he explores them from a fragmented and fragmenting perspective. However, fragmentation appears in his work more as a strategy than a subject. James Rother notes in Barthelme's works a preponderance of "fragmentation bombs,"<sup>12</sup> a fair characterization if one appreciates the deconstructive possibilities to which Barthelme puts his fragmenting perspective. However, he also uses this perspective to re-image ideas of community in what the narrator of "The Glass Mountain" calls more "plausible" forms. R. E. Johnson, Jr. notes some of the possibilities of fragmentation when he concludes his essay on Barthelme's narrative style with an observation that opens up the consideration of the relationship between the fragment and the postulated whole. Barthelme's fiction, he writes, is "an insistence on the priority of the imagination as it realizes itself in language forms which are both old and new because they are at once creative and decreative."<sup>13</sup> This quotation begins to appreciate just how heavily Barthelme's fictions rely on the old to shape the new and, in so shaping them, to challenge the integrity of the new as "new" and the old as "old."

John Leland also appreciates the reshaping value of fragments in his speculations on their ontological possibilities:

To fragment presupposes some whole in the first place capable of being fragmented, just as the fragment, incomplete in itself, presupposes a whole or totality which "completes" it. Thus the fragment, meaningful as fragment, leads us directly to the problem of wholes; and a literature of fragments must play itself out against the totality it refuses to be.<sup>14</sup>

Leland observes how the old-new conjunction can be operative, emphasizing the ongoing relationship between meaningful fragments and meaningful wholes. He realizes that the lines between paradigms of old and new can never be clearly drawn. For example, we cannot recognize our alienation from what he calls "historical/cultural signifieds" (RR 796) without relying on our understanding of them for a reference, as in the logic of the hermeneutic circle. It is in his portrayal of how this understanding leads to alienation that Leland finds the importance of Barthelme's use of fragments.

In other words, Barthelme uses fragments with an eye to history. In "Paraguay," for instance, the narrator asks his guide why some red snow is kept behind a wall. He is told, "Like any other snow, it invites contemplation and walking about in" (CL 30). Alluring because of its seemingly mystical quality, this snow has no ultimate meaning except, as Leland observes, to invite "the tracing of new patterns" (RR 797). These new patterns rely on old forms, but the

patterns do not take their forms from them. Reading Barthelme through Levi-Straus's writings on myth, Leland is led to speculate that Barthelme's position may be summarized in the following statement: "We may be prisoners of our own fictions as we search for ultimate meanings, but the shifting surface of the snow in Paraguay continuously invites contemplation and walking about in" (RR 810).<sup>15</sup>

The shifting snow of "Paraguay" provides an image of how Barthelme attempts to fragment the idea of culture. Visualize a snow fall and one can visualize one image of culture: myriad components (flakes) constituting one recognizable whole (the snowfall). However, if one considers the reputed uniqueness of every flake, then each snowstorm is drastically unrecognizable from any other one. Taking these two perspectives together, my argument is that Barthelme's stories explore the way a consideration of fragments undercuts the perception of an uncompromised whole culture, in part by suggesting that alienation from itself is actually one of western culture's buttresses.

The extent to which Barthelme sees fragments in all cultural arrangements is evident in the numerous ways they are employed in his work. Fragments occur structurally, as in the brief chapters that constitute Snow White or the short stories that constitute his collections. They occur thematically, as in the internal repetitions within a single story or novel or in the recurrence of themes through

various stories or within a novel. They also occur stylistically, as in the broken dialogues of "The Explanation," the lists of Snow White, or the numbered lines of "The Glass Mountain." In all these aspects, fragments are indispensable to the "collage" effect Barthelme professed to be trying to create in his work. They are a definitive and yet a destabilizing part of the pastiche and parody one finds in his stories. Fragmenting not only appears as the norm in a new postmodern world but in the world preceding it--which is never entirely gone.

Through the strategy of the fragment, Barthelme creates scenarios that rely on a dualistic understanding of the world and then "trashes" that understanding. For example, in his first collection of short stories, entitled Come Back, Dr. Caligari, the recurrent lamentation of the title character in "Florence Green is 81" suggests the desire for the new: "I want to go to some other place . . . Somewhere where everything is different" (DG 14). To some extent the stories in Come Back, Dr. Caligari all seem to strive to reach that place through the fractures in their narratives. However, they also acknowledge that a place where everything is different cannot be expressed in language, which to be understood must refer to a supposedly whole and unfractured past. Thus, the narrator of "Florence Green is 81," the would-be-famous-author Baskerville, suggests Florence's desire is misguided: "Florence I have decided is evading

the life issue" (DG 13). And the life issue, as long as we are committed to language (or as long as it commits us), means everything cannot be different.

At the same time, however, Barthelme rejects the idea of relying on old scripts to redetermine value. For instance, in "The Glass Mountain" he rehashes a Norse tale called "The Princess on the Glass Hill," which was collected in The Yellow Fairy Book. In the original story, a poor young man on horseback must scale a steep glass hill and rescue the princess on top of it. Cheered on by the local townspeople, he not only wins the princess but becomes heir to the King's land and wealth. In contrast, Barthelme's version has the narrator scale a glass mountain, with the aid of plumber's helpers strapped to his feet, to seek an enchanted symbol. Jeered by urbanites yelling obscenities, he is about to fall when an eagle appears and lifts him to success, albeit a painful one since the eagle's talons rip his hand. When the enchanted symbol turns into a princess, the narrator rejects the symbol by casting her down the mountain to the rabble waiting beneath, who, we are told, "could be relied upon to deal with her" (CL 65). He concludes his quest by observing, "Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment" (CL 65).

The story rejects the symbol both as transcendental signified, in Gardner's moral sense, and as a practical order that fiction can impose, as in Oates's political

sense. But at the same time the narrator's reason, that the situation is not "plausible," is far removed from the radical prescriptions of Federman.<sup>16</sup> The narrator's cryptic remark that the urbanites can be relied upon to "deal with" the princess speaks significantly about how Barthelme suggests we deal with symbols. His narrator is compelled by his acceptance of a supposedly singular cultural heritage to seek the symbol, but he must then shatter that symbol, violently make its surface shift, in order for him to be able to deal with it plausibly.

In other words, Barthelme advocates a movement away from the narrative of coherent meaningful order that underlies the western conception of culture. This order imposes an overdetermined idea of progress as patriarchal, and so Barthelme denies progress. This rejection includes any progressive movements that follow prescriptive agendas for improvement, a demand that has had some harsh consequences in Barthelme's treatment of a number of humanist initiatives. For example, Barthelme submits feminism to a scathing satire in Snow White at a time when it was, as it were, struggling to be born. However, since Barthelme believes that any structured thinking is ultimately in line with phallogentric interests, his satire of feminism in Snow White is as much a criticism of agendas as of feminism.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the symbolic violence done to the princess in "The Glass Mountain" is both a critique of a

symbolic patriarchal practice and a critique of the orderly "progressive" thinking (as played out in the narrator's gradual ascent and the numbered lines of the story) behind the exposition of such a practice. The rigidity of his critiques lessens as his writing matures,<sup>18</sup> suggesting that in his early works Barthelme seeks a metafictional perch, hoping for the transcendental indemnity "meta" implies. Nonetheless, the satire of his early career is designed, in the words of Larry McCaffery, "to provoke readers to critically examine all cultural codes and established patterns of thought."<sup>19</sup> Thus, one of Barthelme's strategies with fragments is to employ them to shatter the recognizable forms of culture, so that one may sift through the resulting shards, looking for plausible collages.

This search is no easy matter, especially considering what Jack Hicks calls the "maddeningly self-conscious nature"<sup>20</sup> of Barthelme's prose, which is likely already to be markedly aware of the possibility that all has been done before.<sup>21</sup> Certainly, the possibility of language as an exhausted form, coupled with the need to re-render man-created systems can make unappetizing fodder for literature—but not in Barthelme's case. As Hicks observes, "The great drama of consciousness is not so majestic to Barthelme, and in his best work there is an almost desperate amusement that makes man's sorry state bearable" (ST 28). He and his "metafictional" cohorts have observed that humor is a

strategy that can make disruption palatable for both author and reader,<sup>22</sup> but Barthelme's humor is not simply the sugar coating on a pill. It is also an historical representation of fragmentation in practice, and so a logical starting point for his own investigation of the relationship between old and new.<sup>23</sup>

Appropriately enough, my discussion of Barthelme's fiction is fragmented into three sections, each punctuated by a discussion of a novel. The first section considers Come Back, Dr. Caligari through City Life, followed by a discussion of Snow White. This section highlights the emphasis Barthelme places on trashing or shattering literary forms. The second section considers Sadness and Amateurs, finishing with an examination of The Dead Father. It explores the slips in the use of language that re-inscribe oxymoronic notions of patriarchal wholes, implicitly arguing that it is more "plausible" to modify these wholes than to attempt to eradicate them. The final section surveys Great Days through Forty Stories, concluding with an analysis of The King. This section examines the paradox that results from trying to improve upon a patriarchy when much of its staying power depends on the very notion of "progress."

#### Fragerments and Separation

In an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz, Barthelme discusses what the collage effect accomplishes: "This new



reality in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may be also much else. It's an itself if it's successful."<sup>24</sup> The fragmentary perspective Barthelme adopts attempts to acknowledge the whole from which the fragment allegedly derives without affirming it. The fragment is recognized as that part of the "whole" that calls attention to the problems inherent in the necessity to synthesize metaphysical completeness.

Barthelme attempts to distance himself from two historical perspectives that address fragments: first, the idea that the fragment is a remnant broken off from an Edenic past and, second, the idea that the fragment is a piece of that past from which we can progress toward a logically complete future. These two contentions, the metaphors of the lost Eden and the new Utopia, work together to re-inscribe patriarchy by making it the beginning and end of culture--in effect, by naturalizing the view of patriarchy as history.

The recognition that any such synthesis of old and new into a prescription for contemporary existence cannot be made from fragments foregrounds Barthelme's early works. For instance, it is the discovery of the narrator of "Florence Green is 81," the piece that begins his first collection of short stories, Come Back, Dr. Caligari. The narrator, Baskerville, criticizes Florence's yearnings for a "different" existence: "Florence I have decided is evading

the life-issue. She is proposing herself as more unhappy than she really is. She has in mind making herself more interesting. She is afraid of boring us. She is trying to establish her uniqueness. She does not want to go away" (DC 13). However, when one considers Baskerville's position, one see that he himself does not want her to go away. The dialectic between the narrator and Florence, between the young man trying to locate his place in the world and the old woman trying to remain contemporary within it, is one of unfulfillable expectations. Baskerville, the narrator, is a "fragment" in the life of Florence Green, and Florence, whose life is the ostensible subject of a traditional, "whole" narrative, is nevertheless incomplete. This relationship draws out the problem between distinctions based on notions of completeness. The narrator, while disparaging Florence for insisting on her own uniqueness for fear of boring us, repeatedly insists on his own uniqueness and in fact may bore us: "I am a young man but very brilliant, very ingratiating. I edit . . . but I explained all that" (DC 16). The narrator needs to find his place in Florence's world, or at least the world where she has flourished, the wholeness of her narrative. Florence, however, looks to the different, the new, as if her whole existence has not proven satisfactory, or if satisfactory, as if only on the condition that it come to an end.

Florence's story invites the criticisms to which Baskerville subjects it, but his criticism becomes a reflection of the difficult relationship between critic and criticized, between old and new. Florence and Baskerville have a mirror-image relationship. In this relationship, Florence Green, by her very station in life, encourages Baskerville to take his best shot at critiquing her and then watches him hit himself. He is shattered at the same time as he remains the same. Barthelme suggests that this experience of shattering the model of fulfillment and then remodelling oneself in its remnants is the paradigmatic experience of the subject in patriarchal culture. It prepares Baskerville one day to replace Florence and be himself the complete, yet discontented narrative. Thus, Barthelme's lesson is that the mirror always gives a reflection of shattered expectations, which in turn become reconstructed into an "improved" new reflection. His implicit criticism ridicules the succession of patriarchal narratives in western cultural history as that of a broken system in denial, attempting to effect the image of an open circle but failing. This image is made especially prominent when we see Baskerville, after his criticisms are reflected back at him, in his car, driving himself "in idiot circles in the street" (DC 16).

These idiot circles represent the re-imaging of "complete" narratives that Barthelme sees throughout

literary history.<sup>25</sup> In his first three short story collections, he examines a number of narrative types that can lead to such idiotic circles. For example, "The Piano Player," also from Come Back, Dr. Caligari, is basically a parable considering the relative merits of romanticism and realism. It begins with a husband, Brian, looking outside his window, pondering the future of the five-year-old child playing across the street. His outlook is hopelessly sentimental--he sees the child as "square and stout as a mailbox" but believes, "there [is] a butterfly locked inside that mailbox, surely" and ponders, "[W]ould it ever escape?" (DC 19).

In sharp contrast to Brian's perspective is his wife's. She interrupts his meditations and, entering by "crawling in through the door on her hands and knees," complains, "I'm ugly. Our children are ugly" (DC 19). If Brian's head is figuratively as high in the sky as a butterfly, his wife's is too close to the ground. She laments:

It's senseless, senseless, senseless . . . I've been caulking the medicine chest. What for? I don't know. You've got to give me more money. Ben is bleeding. Bessie wants to be an S.S. man. She's reading The Rise and Fall. She's identified with Himmler. Is that her name? Bessie? (DC 21)

She sees hysteria in all walks of life, whereas he sees an inviolable butterfly and suggests that if she simply played the piano, her world would seem better. He even offers to bring the piano out to her, while she contends that he has never even touched it, that in fact his entire perspective

is "out of touch," that should he even touch the piano, it would strike him dead.

In this battle between a world of sentimental possibilities and a world of absurd realities, absurdity wins. The piano does strike Brian dead. His sentiment that harmony can pervade all is overturned. The wife's ground-hugging "realism" of dysfunctional families, hams "cured" by penicillin, and burning giraffes in Connecticut proves more accurate than Brian's vision of sentimental bliss. Yet her "realism" is itself fractured. Her vision of the world is that of someone shattered, someone real only in the model of the female hysteric. Her discourse, then, reflects such an hysteria, drifting between categories of discourse. The humor of her observations is discomfoting, often relying on loaded metonymic shifts and homophonic slides representative of a reality that resists any single interpretive frame. Thus, hers is a realism close to the ground only in the sense that it has fallen from the air, as the princess falls in "The Glass Mountain," with metaphysically shattering results.<sup>26</sup> In "The Piano Player," the categories of sentimental idealism and disillusioned realism break down not only as solutions but as models. With the shards of dualistic positions scattered so, opposites are not. Solutions that rely on distinctions found in traditional logic demonstrate only that any categorical classification is a horror.

Barthelme addresses this horror again in "Hiding Man," also from Come Back, Dr. Caligari. Though the story is actually narrated in the first person, the plot progresses primarily via exchanges of dialogue between the narrator, I.A.L. Burlingame, and the disguised priest, Adrian Bane-Hipkiss, as they speak in a deserted movie theater specializing in schlock horror films. (Attack of the Puppet People is currently playing.) Burlingame and Bane-Hipkiss are opposites ostensibly brought together to seek resolution. Their opposing perspectives are brought out on a number of levels. For instance, Bane-Hipkiss is a priest whose job is to foster the feeling of a community, whereas Burlingame is a recluse who hides from community. Bane-Hipkiss confesses to being afraid of naming, which can determine him until "identity is gone, blown away" (DC 30); Burlingame is afraid of action. These levels represent the various philosophical and religious extremes whose competing attempts to explain existence have turned it into a horror of discontent. For example, the fear Burlingame shares with Bane-Hipkiss is played out in the dialectic between them. It is allegedly designed to bring out their fears and, by naming them and acting on them, to purge them. Thus, they prod each other to "confess," acting out the religious ritual that frames the story.

Burlingame says that he hides from priests but, more particularly, from a priest who wanted him to play

basketball. He tells Bane-Hipkiss that it was not the accoutrement of the sacerdotal--saints, censers and sanctuaries--that he could not believe in; it was the basketball. In this, as in all things, Burlingame abhors the act. He sees rituals and celebrations always leading to "the possibility of other rituals, other celebrations" (DC 35), which are not causally related to the belief systems behind them. Therefore, while Burlingame finds it "impossible not to believe" (DC 34), he remains wary of the actions that ensue from belief. He tries to escape from action, from action that does not properly follow from belief, as basketball does not follow properly from Catholicism.

In contrast, Bane-Hipkiss believes in the confessional process. He hopes that by naming his fears he can overcome them. Thus, he is able to "strip away his skin" (DC 35) of cultural names and categories so as to reveal the priest within sent to reclaim the heretical Burlingame's soul. Burlingame, however, rejects such simplicity. His life is so mediated by the drek of the horror genre in which he dwells that he cannot simply strip it away. For example, at one point Burlingame speculates about the danger of meeting with Bane-Hipkiss: "Is this not real life, risk and danger, as in Voodoo Woman, as in Creature from the Black Lagoon?" (DC 30). Burlingame's primary belief is that the purity that is supposed to come from the confessional loses its

essence in its translation into action. Basketball is just as likely to result as truth.

For Burlingame, Bane-Hipkiss's strain of purity results in a horror, while, ironically, his world of schlock horror can work "miracles," a point proven when he injects the priest with a potion that renders him a barking beast, a character from a scene out of one of Burlingame's horror films. Even as he opposes the priest, Burlingame observes that most people have "no faith in any manifestation not certified by hierarchy" (DC 37), or in other words by a meaningful whole.<sup>27</sup>

The result of Burlingame's confession is the projection outward of the horror he sees in ritual. The horror he lives in insulates him, then; but he is insulated within a schlock genre, a kind of horror in itself, which Barthelme implies is peculiar to life in the twentieth century.

Barthelme maintains that this horror permeates everyday life, since we invariably model our behavior according to competing interpretive systems, themselves all "models" of patriarchal culture. For instance, in "The Viennese Opera Ball" he describes a world of competing conversations, which appears as a collage of the fragments that comprise daily life. Covering diverse grounds, including art, medicine, international finance, and government, these conversations are linked together by a discussion of models. For example, a fashion model is discovered at the ball, which itself is



to a great extent made up of the conversations of models. The primary model is one Carola Mitt, who will be discovered by a glamour photographer as the ball proceeds. But the word "model" works in another semantic context as well: the ball itself models a world consisting of fragments--disjointed glimpses of people and conversations whirling around in a supposedly integral whole, the world of the "ball." However, the ball is as unstable as are the conversations between the people who comprise it. Accordingly, Carola proves to be a virtually generic model, not an individual or novelty at all. As the discussions proceed, her discovery is compared to the discoveries of various other glamour models who have since been absorbed into the ball as its unremarkable components.

As Carola's story indicates, while it is clear that everyone at the ball is somehow linked, the relationship of the part to the whole is unclear. This ambiguity is reflected not only in its litany of "models" but also in the logic of distinct conversations within the ball. For example, one conversation begins with Carola's observation that "smog is an interesting name" (DC 89). Following this observation is an abstract of the ensuing conversation. It begins with an observation about the industrialization of Islamabad. One cannot be sure if this remark is prompted by Carola's mention of an interesting name (assuming Islamabad to be an interesting name) or by the smog that may result

from industrialization. From Islamabad's industrialization the talk shifts to the architect of the modern buildings there, then to the nuclear reactor the largest modern building will house, and then to the company that sold the reactor to Pakistan. This "natural" evolution of a conversation relies on a slippage in language similar to the slippage that links models to models without ever seeming to disrupt the process of the ball and yet without ever finding a stable model of models. A loose train of logic prevails and yet derails as it goes along. For example, the conversation above continues by providing a history of AMF (the company that sold Pakistan the reactor), then by giving a biographical sketch of its chairman, Mr. Patterson. Patterson, we finally come to understand, does not like pollution and is not attending the ball. The conversation has now come full circle--all the while moving further from closure.

Details are fragments that can be exchanged without a loss in the semblance of unity, just as the models drifting through the discussions that tie the ball together can be exchanged without the loss of a model. From a distance, this process may seem reassuring, but as the conversations continue, the slippage becomes more severe and the logic more fractured. Whole conversations can be replaced without a loss, the particular logic of one conversation spilling into or eliding another. For example, Carola resurfaces at

the ball: "She remembered Knocko at the Evacuation Day parade, and Baudelaire's famous remark. Mortality is the final evaluator of methods. An important goal is an intact sphincter. The greater the prematurity, the more generous should be the episiotomy" (DC 90-91).<sup>28</sup> Thus, categorical distinctions spill over into one another. In a particularly suggestive example, we are told the following:

The Foundation is undertaking a comprehensive analytical study of the economic and social positions of the artist and of his institutions in the United States. In part this will serve as a basis for future policy decisions and program activities. The contemplated study will also be important outside the Foundation. The climate of the arts today, discussion reveals, is complex and various. (DC 92)

This passage suggests that the arts, sciences, and government will work together to make informed decisions about complex situations.<sup>29</sup> However, what follows it is a list of random citations, apparently from texts that comprise the various fields mentioned. This chaotic presentation serves as a translation of the Foundation's project, a translation that undermines the order that we count on to make such projects plausible.

Seen in its various parts, the Foundation's project no longer makes sense. The problematic relationship of the part to the whole is magnified. What seems to be a unifying experience is actually composed of endless disjunctions--until finally these disjunctions also become a model of the ball. Thus, the "ball" as suggesting circularity,

sphericity, as the archetypal model of models turns out to be a model of fragments.

The everyday model of life that becomes a horror of fractured understanding in "The Viennese Opera Ball" is refigured symbolically in "The Balloon," from Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts. As in the earlier story, this horror is tied to people's desire for spherical completion, which is now grotesquely equated with technology (engineers oversee the balloon) and phallocentricism (it invites jokes and common images that unite condoms and balloons).

"The Balloon" proposes an immense balloon, "covering forty-five blocks north-south and an irregular area east-west" (UP 16), hovering over New York City. The narrator, the balloon's overseer, recounts the various reactions people have to what he describes as "this balloon, concrete particular, hanging there" (UP 16). This description characterizes the balloon as an "itself," paradigmatic of Barthelme's fragments. However, as people come to define themselves by the balloon, it becomes a meaningful whole. In this way it replaces the meaningful whole represented by the heavens that it obscures. As in "Hiding Man," a schlock horror genre eclipses a conventional form--the mutant balloon ranges over the sky--and performs better than the form it replaces. However, just as in "Hiding Man," the performance of the fragment becomes ominous.

For example, the balloon itself gets fragmented. It is no more capable of providing the blanketing security of the heavens than the heavens are. The ominous is made "plausible" even as it becomes comical. For example, the narrator observes:

It was agreed that since the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely, extended discussion was pointless, or at least less purposeful than the activities of those who, for example, hung green and blue paper lanterns from the warm grey underside, in certain streets, or seized the occasion to write messages on the surface announcing their availability for the performance of unnatural acts, or the availability of acquaintances. (UP 16-17)

Thus, once accepted as a whole, the balloon comes to have more meaning as a fragment. This situation is similar to that of the ball in "The Viennese Opera Ball." It seems that fragmenting the meaning of the balloon, described above as inviting "unnatural acts," serves more purposes than totalizing the meaning of the balloon, accepting it as nature, which would be a pointless act.

The narrator observes, "People began, in a curious way, to locate themselves in relation to aspects of the balloon" (UP 20). Obviously "locate themselves" means more than "physically situate themselves." The narrator speaks in terms that suggest the balloon is of metaphysical importance: "Each intersection was crucial, meeting of balloon and building, meeting of balloon and man, meeting of balloon and balloon" (UP 21). Thus, the balloon suggests the metaphysical as much as the heavens it eclipses had

done. After it becomes their environment, people attempt to relate to the balloon as parts to its whole, as western metaphysics demands. However, as understanding the balloon comes to be seen as useless, understanding how it can be apportioned becomes crucial. A slippage in metaphysical emphasis occurs, from part to whole to part to part.

Finally, all the metaphysical importance of the balloon is undercut when it is revealed that it is a "spontaneous autobiographical disclosure" (UP 22) of the narrator, having to do with the unease he felt at a loved one's absence and his resulting sexual deprivation. Similar to the way the Viennese Opera Ball's importance seemed to be modeled on Carola, the balloon's importance deflates along with the narrator.

So, the metaphysical bind gives way to a more personal and political one. For example, as a displacement of sexual energy, the balloon is a giant phallus. It suggests the "size" of the phallus in our culture and our focus upon it. Metaphorically, it comments upon a world dominated by the phallus and phallocentric concerns. When the narrator speculates that it will be brought out again "perhaps, when we are angry with one another" (UP 22), he makes a libidinal assertion, however tentative and comical, that underscores the violence of the phallic economy. That the balloon succeeds the heavens makes little difference; people seem

able to adjust, primarily because the heavens, overseen by God the Father, have always been phallic.

For the same reason, the removal of the balloon causes little problem. As a matter of fact, it re-inscribes the symbolic economy: first, by gratifying the male, and second, in doing so by restoring the metaphysical climate that supports the symbolic economy. Thus, after the narrator's "loved one" returns, she fulfills stereotypical feminine roles. Even if we see the narrator's female lover as empowered because her return deflates the balloon, she is reabsorbed into the phallic economy. For example, she can be seen as the castrating woman by the way her return eliminates the balloon (thus leading us to conclude that the narrator's initial anger with her is justified); and she can also be seen as fulfilling the function recognizable in Victorian literature as that of the angel of the household by preventing the narrator from further corrupting the "natural" world.

The seeming contradiction actually reinforces phallogocentric logic, which, as Barthelme writes in The Dead Father, likes to have things both ways. The heavens are still restored, a restoration that replaces a phallus with another phallus, just as the models in the ball replaced each other, and any challenge to phallic supremacy is demonstrated to be possible only in terms of the phallic symbolic economy. Thus, Barthelme's concentration is not so

much a fashionably defeatist, complicit pseudo-critique as it is a way of addressing his concern that their might be a hegemonic power hidden behind the ideas of enlightened technological progress.

Here as elsewhere, the alienation and detachment evident in Barthelme's work are seldom turned inward toward solipsism or what Gardner calls "minor romantic" narcissism (OMF 81). In fact, they vividly point outward, to what we are alienated and detached from, and yet somehow bound to: easy answers, romantic escapes, visions of a homogenized culture. The stories I have addressed present characters longing for completion and groomed to see the world in terms of metaphysical certitude, yet themselves grown too complex for that vision to be accepted without challenge. Moreover, they demonstrate that movements to change the world--notions of progress and correction--are bound up in perpetuating it. In this way they suggest that a protracted ambivalence is the key to patriarchal succession.

Barthelme sees patriarchy as a legacy that insists that it is both vulnerable and inviolable. Thus, on the one hand, it can replicate itself, and, on the other, it can adjust itself. This view is the basis of his critique in The Dead Father. It is also the frame for "Views of My Father Weeping," from City Life, which depicts a son's compulsion to legitimize his succession, after the murder of his father, by following the coded behaviors of patriarchy.



The story begins: "An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father" (CL 3). However, the "father" can never really be killed. In this case, the biological father is simply replaced by the symbolic father, the time-honored authority, the aristocrat. We see that the narrator's task is to prepare himself to replace his biological father in function, while remaining supplicant to the symbolic father in form.

From the outset of the story, when the narrator admits to supposing his father's death "was the best thing" (CL 3), Barthelme emphasizes the ambivalent relationship between fathers and sons. His development of how this ambivalence affects patriarchal succession begins at the funeral, a ritualized ceremony in which the son must learn to replace the father functionally without replacing him symbolically. Part of replacing the father is discovering "reasons" for his demise. In this case, the reasons lead back to the obvious: the son will inevitably replace the father yet still remain subject to fatherdom. Nonetheless, the narrator continues to follow a prescribed, rational course, which includes attempting to "solve" the death of his father and reconcile himself to the authority he gains because of his father's death.

There are many aspects of fatherdom. The narrator observes of his father, "His range is great, his ambition commensurate" (CL 5). This range and ambition cover facets

of culture ranging from economics to the arts. They make the father everywhere, individual, yet interchangeable in a network of fathers. For instance, the narrator observes, "But perhaps it is not my father weeping there, but another father: Tom's father, Phil's father, Pat's father, Pete's father, Paul's father. Apply some sort of test, voiceprint reading or" (CL 5). To some extent fathers are as interchangeable as the models in "The Viennese Opera Ball," yet they are always the model of the father. This model can be confirmed rationally, through the technology of the voiceprint test, or by the many cultural tests left unaddressed by the "or" that dangles at the end of the segment. Of course, technology, like capitalism, is another facet of fatherdom.

However, the narrator also tries to flee from the influence of the father. Reflecting on why he is tormented by recurrent views of his father weeping, the narrator determines that it is because the father insists on trying to make himself "interesting," even after he is gone. The narrator's concerns are reminiscent of the concerns attributed to Florence Green in "Florence Green is 81." The father's alleged fear of being obsolete, a fear that the symbolic importance of fatherdom has nothing more to say to a new world of sons, is similar to the fear of Florence Green;<sup>30</sup> while the son's castigation of those fears at the same time that he is consumed by the father's narrative is

similar to the attitude of Baskerville. To avoid running around in his own idiot circles, then, the narrator must find a way of changing the form of the father's narrative.

Barthelme attempts to change this narrative form by exposing its fragmentary nature and then rearranging the fragments. Just as the reconciliation to fatherdom involves amalgamating the fragments that comprise patriarchal culture, so that the father's power remains in the remains of a father's death, rejecting fatherdom involves rejecting the synthesis of its parts into a meaningful whole.

Barthelme illustrates how ridiculous this synthesis can be when the son gains his "understanding" of fatherdom:

Why! . . . there's my father! . . . sitting in the bed there . . . and he's weeping . . . as though his heart would burst! . . . Father! . . . how is this? . . . who has wounded you? . . . name the man! . . . why I'll . . . I'll . . . here, Father, take this handkerchief! . . . and this handkerchief! . . . and this handkerchief! . . . I'll run for a towel . . . for a doctor . . . for a priest . . . for a good fairy . . . etc. (CL 10)

Taken individually, the requests of fatherdom seem fragmentary, unreconcilable: "bowl of steaming soup?" . . . shot of calvados? . . . a joint?" (CL 10) They run the gamut from the rational to the irrational, his needs from the essential to the illegal. Steeped in this complexity, the reconciliation to fatherdom seems to inspire nothing but tears. However, it is this same complexity that invites the "etc." that concludes the narrator's epiphany--and that establishes fatherdom as being as difficult to dismantle as

it is to understand, and so likely to continue in variations of its present form. In the quotation above, it even co-opts the fragments, which are supposed to challenge the acceptance of fatherhood, into an appreciation of it. Thus, the father continues to be visible in new fragments, continuing his tyrannic reign, which, in turn, continues to make sons perform father functions.

Throughout "Views of My Father Weeping," the narrator has been ambivalent about his father. This ambivalence may pave the way for his ultimate acceptance of fatherdom since the laws of the father are themselves ambivalent. For example, the narrator describes his father's understanding of etiquette:

My father is attending a class in good behavior.

"Do the men rise when friends greet us while we are sitting in booth?"

"The men do not rise when they are seated in a booth," he answers, "although they may half-rise and make apologies for not fully rising." (CL 15)

Fatherhood amounts to the recognition and the violation of rules in equal measure. Thus, it encompasses the challenge to itself, making the son's attempts to escape another ritual in fatherhood. Barthelme demonstrates that such apparent contradictions are in fact the very essence of propriety. The ritual that half rises to its potential and then apologizes for itself is patriarchal enlightenment. Fulfillment is a fairy tale, and the idea that we can attain this fairy tale is structured into the patriarchal culture

we live in, making it, in Barthelme's view, another fairy tale.

Accordingly, Barthelme's first novel, Snow White, examines the fairy-tale mentalities considered in the stories above. It is an update of the traditional and Disney versions of the fairy tale that is particularly Barthelme-esque because it breaks up the story line and modernizes it as a critique, and then fragments that critique to critique it. For example, Snow White both seeks her prince and her independence from needing him. The seven dwarves (called "seven men"), led by Bill, are profiteering baby food manufacturers who cater to Snow White while exploiting her sexually and domestically. The text comments on both the "old" and "new" text, primarily by suggesting that both trap the characters in a culture that will not offer explanations for its inadequacies.

Snow White is trapped in the old by being herself a form, a designation of beauty, and as such much sought after. She is an enchanted symbol; and she seeks her own enchanted symbol, Paul, the Prince, who she frequently suggests is hiding from her as an enchanted frog. Snow White is also a wanton, a poet, a political activist, a college-educated career woman, and a figure who is frustrated under each guise. She complains that she lives in the wrong time, and indeed she is correct. She cannot be saved by a prince, for the fairy tale no longer works; nor

can she rid herself of the name of Snow White and embrace a career, for she is still sought after as an emblem of beauty.

Barthelme suggests that Snow White can no longer be updated and function. Disney was able to add an element of twentieth-century domestic bliss to the plot and keep it a fairy tale, much like the depictions of households in Father Knows Best and The Donna Reed Show, themselves arguably twentieth-century fairy tales. However, when Barthelme tries a similar modern cultural update, the form will not bend. The fairy tale gives way to a bemused horror, like that in "Hiding Man."

The novel begins with a description of Snow White: "She is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty spots" (SW 3). This beginning is conventional enough--the feminine is equated with beauty. However, as they are more closely described, the beauty marks lose their beauty: "one above the breast, one above the belly, one above the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side, more or less in a row" (SW 3). Beauty fragmented and translated does not add up to beauty whole.<sup>31</sup> A further reconfiguration of the beauty spots as a column of dots only makes them lose more of the lustrous quality of beauty, underscoring how beauty is textual and contextual. The dots become like ellipses from previous Barthelme stories, an

"etcetera" that seeks to capture the "whole" meaning of beauty, and a realization that the fragment one finds instead will never add up to the expectations of the whole.

As a matter of fact, in Barthelme's fiction, fragments never add up to a complete picture, only to the desire to find one. For example, Snow White, pondering over which prince will come for her, draws from a list that includes the princes Albert, Rainier, Pericles, Matchabelli and Valiant, among others. This list has been constructed from various representational sources including the political media, literature, history, advertising, and even the comics. Snow White views it with "lofty feelings of anticipation" (SW 77), since from these forms she is to construct her fairy-tale ending. However, she is never able to find that ending. She blames Paul for being a failure: he is "frog through and through" (SW 169). She seems overcome with too many possibilities to accept him. Yet, at the same time, she blames the world for "not being civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story" (SW 132), suggesting the possibilities that inspire her are less than inspiring.

Snow White's first words in the novel lament the world perceived under such constraints: "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" (SW 6). Her complaint is similar to Florence Green's, and for good reason: Snow White is also the

"story" once celebrated, now found wanting. Paul is her opposite, yet her double. Disgruntled by the expectations of a Prince, he hopes to do away with naming, do away with all given forms:

"But retraction has a special allure for me. I would wish to retract everything, if i could, so that the whole written world would be . . . I would retract the green sea, and the brown fish in it, and I would especially retract that long black hair hanging from that window, that I saw today on my way here, from the Unemployment Office." (SW 13)

Paul wishes to do away with all names, forms and symbols. He wants to play no part. Snow White wants to change names, forms and symbols, and play a new part. The hair Paul refers to is Snow White's as she casts it Rapunzel-style out her window hoping to attract a prince. Snow White attempts to change her role, but she can only see as far as another fairy-tale form, and one that also depends on a feminine mark of beauty.

Opposed to Snow White and Paul's concern with their function as representatives of tradition, there is the concern of Bill, the leader of the dwarves, with being a representative of progress. As with the dialectic between the priest and the heretic in "Hiding Man," Barthelme sets up a dialectic between characters who represent the ostensibly opposite ends of patriarchy: Bill, the leader of change, on one side, and Snow White and Paul, the representatives of tradition, on the other.



Although he is the leader, Bill must continually be prodded to fulfill his role, in accordance with Barthelme's usual irony. For example, his workmate Henry complains that he wastes his potential by his refusal to act out leadership functions: "We are little children compared to him in terms of possibility, and yet all he seems to want to do is sit around the game room, and shuffle the Bezique cards, and throw darts and that sort of thing, when he could be out realizing his potential" (SW 20). Bill has always believed in the language of leadership, but he cannot act on it. His introspection and belief in a personal coda never translated into adequate results. What results do follow never seemed appropriate. For example, he laments his failure to "make a significant contribution": "I wanted to substantiate an unsubstantiated report . . . I had in mind launching a three-pronged assault, but the prongs wandered off seduced by fires and clowns" (SW 52-53). His fears are similar to Burlingame's: he cannot help but believe in the form of the jargon of leadership, but the actions that follow, the "counter-marches," can be "seduced" and continue uncontrolled.

The other characters of the novel include the rest of the seven dwarves; the narrator (a limited omniscient voice identified with but never as one of the seven men); Jane, the wicked stepmother figure; and Hogo, a contemporary evil troll. These characters operate within the dialectic

established by Snow White and Paul on one side and Bill on the other. For example, when Snow White complains of a dearth of words, the seven men look for "things that were more or less satisfactory, or at least adequate, to serve the purpose, for the time being" (SW 6). They do not look for the perfect word but content themselves with the practical. Whereas Paul admits to having "loftier ambitions" but acknowledges to himself, "only I don't know what they are, exactly" (SW 27), the seven men (conveniently scaled down) behave more by Henry's credo: "I can certainly improve on what was given" (SW 30).

Playing off the idea that these characters are merely pieces of his novel, Barthelme addresses the problem of each fragmented view being taken as a model for completeness, the results of which can only lead to what Robert A. Morace calls "a reductive political equality,"<sup>32</sup> in other words, a model in which enlightened progress is ultimately devaluing. The problem for the "whole" characters is how to work within what is given, when that is always fragmentary. For instance, at one point Snow White espouses sayings from Mao-Tse-Tung's Red Book while on the opposing page her fairy-tale psychological history--fears of combs and poison apples--is recorded.

Thus, on various levels, Snow White is trapped between the pages of a book that can only provide her with variations on the same theme. Her dilemma is made most

clear when the following apostrophe introduces the record of Snow White's curriculum at Beaver College:

THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS  
INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST, BUT  
COMPLICATED BY THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND  
POLITICAL REPRESSION. ULTIMATELY THEY FOUND AN  
ANSWER NOT IN SOCIETY BUT IN VARIOUS FORMS OF  
INDEPENDENCE FROM SOCIETY: HEROISM, ART,  
SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE (SW 24)

Just as the romantics (as the stereotypical curriculum would have it) became trapped within their independence, Snow White, seeking her own independence, becomes trapped in the curriculum of Beaver College. The name itself suggests that the collegiate learning she hopes will free her simply reinscribes, with stereotypical vulgarity, her conventional designation as "woman," just as her beauty marks do.

The curriculum at Beaver College includes such courses as "Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities" and "Personal Resources I and II." Consider the objectives of "Modern Woman": "[the study] of the nature and nurture of women and what they stand for, in evolution and in history, including householding, upbringing, peacekeeping, healing and devotion, and how these contribute to the rehumanizing of today's world" (SW 25). For this rehumanizing to occur, one must accept the historical idea of progress, in this case, the progress of "the nature and nurture of women." Thus, "Personal Resources I and II" requires "self-evaluation, developing the courage to respond to the environment, opening and using the mind, individual

experience, training, the use of time, mature redefinition of goals, action projects" (SW 25). Here, we have a modern humanist, perhaps even feminist, curriculum that masks a perpetuation of patriarchal ideas of femininity by insisting that the "rehumanized" woman to whom it pertains be configured from the old. While the course title suggests an amenability to change, it precludes the possibility of that change occurring--the course changes names, not ideas. Thus, Snow White cannot find an adequate course for "independence" and learns once again old scripts with new titles. The ending of this chapter, "Then she studied--" suggests that these various scripts recur. It critiques a view of feminism as necessarily evolving by suggesting that what evolves is never distinct from what has been. In a sense, Snow White is correct in observing that she always hears the same old words.

While Snow White cannot name for herself a course to complement her sensibilities, Bill knows his course but cannot act upon it. He sees leadership as incumbent upon him, but fears where it may lead. His fear stems from his experience with authority. Bill is concerned with the actions that can result from embracing the ideology behind leadership. For example, he recalls that as a young scout he was told to scour a pot with mud to clean it, a scout "mystery," consistent with the mystery Barthelme sees surrounding patriarchal authority--that the leader makes and

violates the rules. In this case, Bill sees mud as an inefficient way to clean pots. When he uses Ajax instead, he is rebuked by his scout master. Bill's mistake is that he does not appreciate the paradox that authorizes authority. It is not merely the fact of accomplishing a task that is important--it is the adherence to the rules that make accomplishing that task consistent with leadership. Mud cleans, but only for a leader. Because Bill cannot appreciate this point, he is threatened with a fate reflective of his symbolic misunderstanding: a great black horse is to devour him: he will be destroyed by a dark symbolic manifestation of phallic power.

Bill spends his life avoiding the horse, and so avoiding the actions incumbent on a "leader." His dilemma is that he can neither deny the power the horse represents nor use it to implement his leadership. He buys into the system without buying into how it works. He cannot appreciate that authority ultimately comes from being able to apply a logic that is not itself necessarily logical. This logic is in effect a scout "mystery." Bill flinches in the face of this power for reasons similar to Burlingame's: the act does not follow from the warrant. Authority tells him to clean; he does so very efficiently: and the result gets him in trouble.

Consequently, Bill sees the world as a series of scout mysteries over which he cannot preside. Yet, as a

designated leader, he can still name courses of action. (Just as Snow White, for all her incoherent unloveliness, can still be beautiful.) For example, responding to Snow White's "hair initiative," Bill rattles off a plethora of possibilities about its meaning, but puzzles over what he is to do about it. Acting means embracing the logic of leadership that he has not found plausible from his personal experience. Ironically, then, his position of leadership thrives on its failures. He sees possibilities of action and, by constantly deferring action on any of them, sees even more. Like Snow White, he is frozen by an excess of images, but finds this excess comforting.

Naturally, Bill's contemplative bent makes him suspect as leader in the eyes of the other men. He compounds this suspicion by failing to perform the "mysteries" of leadership, which ultimately amount to the duties of a "man." For example, he withdraws from Snow White--he is not a leader sexually. Later in the novel, he loses the baby food profits on his way to the bank--he is not a leader financially. In effect, Bill's comprehension of leadership is too thorough and interferes with his performance. He comes to discover that ultimately a leader is measured by his actions, not his comprehensions. Even his one major act in the novel, throwing a six-pack of Miller beer through the car window of the scoutmasters who threatened him with their tale of the dark horse, keeps him from performing a

leadership function--tending the vats of baby food--and he is charged with attempted "vatricide."

Bill deserves his eventual conviction because the one action he takes challenges the patriarchal system of logic--and mystery--that authorizes leadership. Yet his rebellion is as misguided as Snow White's. Bill attempts to destroy a symbol of leadership by acting like a leader. Even if he were to succeed, then, he would fail. In fact, this is what happens to Bill when he is hanged for the crime of vatricide. The narrator describes raising Bill to the sky, where he "will become doubtless one of those skyheroes, like Theodicy and Rime" (SW 179), and where his failings can finally be incorporated into the mystery of leadership.

In Snow White, the notions of tradition and progress are trashed by the characters who espouse them. Barthelme offers a tentative compromise position in the views of the rest of the dwarves, characters who are not "whole" characters. (Snow White observes, "The seven of them only add up to the equivalent of about two real men" (41-42).) They make the uncertainty of language a prospect for action, in effect "dwarfing" the expectations one can maintain. For example, the narrator recounts the experience of reading an abstruse novel by an author named Dampfboot:

Fragments kept flying off the screen into the audience, fragments of rain and ethics. Hubert wanted to go back to the dog races. But we made him read his part, the outer part where the author is praised and the price quoted. We like books that have a lot of dreck in them, matter which

presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of "sense" of what is going on. (SW 106)

The rest of the seven men do not seek "whole" relevance and they are satisfied with only a "kind of" sense. This appreciation enables them to respond to situations to which Snow White and Bill cannot, usually by applying their principle of a "kind of" sense. For example, noting that the per-capita production of trash is at 4.5 pounds per day and increasing at four percent annually, the men start collecting plastic buffalo humps at the baby food plant. Dan explains that trash quotient may soon reach "100 per cent" and the men desire "to be on the leading edge of this trash phenomenon" (SW 97-98).

Dan's logic is recognizable--for example, in the sense of corporate expansion--but "trashed." The "trash phenomenon" of language and culture means acting upon the fragments of conventional norms and logic. It is not civilized in ways Snow White can understand, but the men can give words to it. It is not practical in ways that Bill can appreciate, but they can act on its impetus. With their partial appreciations, the men get a "sense" of what is going. It is this sense of what is going on that keeps them from worrying about responding to meaningful wholes to which no one can adequately respond, such as, for instance, Snow White's hair. In fact, Dan's discussion of the trash



phenomenon is labeled "Lack of reaction to the hair" (SW 96).

The secret to responding to new phenomena is then not to adopt but to adapt--to get a sense of the law and then react. This adaptation is what keeps one from travelling in idiotic circles. For example, when drinking at a cafe, the men stain a tablecloth with wine and are told they must pay for the removal of the stain. Their response is to pour the rest of the wine on the tablecloth so that a single stain cannot be located. Their sense of the rules enables them to improvise and, as Clem says, "certainly improve on what was given." To do this, the "given" must neither be revered or feared. As a policeman observing the wine scene observes, "The law is the law. That is what is wrong with it, that it is the law" (SW 172).

Of course, this improvement does not necessarily follow an altruistic course consistent with melioristic notions of progress and culture such as the fairy-tale and Disney version of Snow White suggest. It is frequently a trashing of such conceptions. The best example of this tendency uses the "heigh ho" theme of Disney's Snow White. "Heigh ho" is the dwarves' work song. In Disney's version, it sends them to the mines to dig for ore. They work the mines seeking out a pure product. This digging is a metaphor for the story's morality, a quest for purity, consistent with Snow White's quest for a prince and the prince's quest for the

virginal Snow White. It conveniently passes off profit as purity and entirely discounts visceral desire. By contrast, in Barthelme's Snow White this moral principle is exposed as lust for money. The seven men begin the novel seeking monetary profit, and their motivation is exploitive: "It is amazing how many mothers will spring for an attractively packaged jar of Baby Dim sum, a tasty-looking potlet of Baby Jing Shar Shew Bow. Heigh-ho." (SW 18). "Digging" for profit exposes the law of purity for the trash it is. Significantly, this digging is even taught to them by their father, who gave them the baby food recipes.

True, this patriarchal law is questioned when the men recall that the salient point about their father is that he was "not very interesting" (SW 19). Their observation calls to mind the criticisms of Florence Green and again comments on the relationship of fragments to wholes. The men do not revere their father; however, they are accustomed to adapting his legacy for their own use. Hence, to "improve" their digging, they turn literally to digging for trash, which yields profits and thus figuratively remains digging for gold.

Similarly, the men trash other Disneyesque values. For example, in Disney's Snow White, the men also "mine" Snow White to protect her and buttress their own morality. In Barthelme's text, this figurative probing is made literal as the men trudge to her bed, "singing the to-bed song Heigh-

ho" (SW 49). Snow White is mined for her specific use, not for her abstract value. Purity survives as a barometer for the men, but a barometer they feel free constantly to readjust. When Clem, for instance, ponders an affair with a stewardess, he must rationalize away his devotion to Snow White. Recalling that Snow White only accepts sexual congress in the shower (a clean trashing of purity), Clem determines, "It is not Snow White I would be being unfaithful to, but the shower" (SW 23).

Barthelme recognizes the problem with the compromise the men seek between tradition and progress. He realizes that the text in which he enacts this compromise is compromised itself if it offers too neat a solution. Thus, while the men try to find the plausible by bending the forms of the rational and mystical that reinforce the patriarchal, they remain bounded within those parameters. For example, the narrator comments on "the irruption of the magical in the life of Snow White" (SW 70). A singing bone offers her various mystical prophecies. The narrator comments, "The behavior of the bone is unacceptable. The bone must be persuaded to confine itself to events and effects susceptible of confirmation by the instrumentarium of the physical sciences. Someone must reason with the bone" (SW 70). This treatment of the bone represents phallogocentric logic as it moves away from the logic of myth and superstition towards the equally phallic logic of science

and reason. Impossible, like Snow White, magic must progress; the men do not escape this fragmenting imperative.

Thus, the men have not found a new way of framing their reality. They are bounded still: after they hang Bill, they elect a new leader; after Snow White refuses Paul, they re-embrace her. Even their initiatives are compromised. Trash is important because it may become 100 per cent, and the tablecloth is not a problem because it becomes all stain. They are acting toward a plausible improvement, but because they do not know what constitutes plausibility, their actions finally do move in dwarf-sized idiotic circles.

In Snow White the men continue to seek a vague "something better" in some form because "anathematization of the world is not an adequate response to the world" (SW 178). In the meantime, traditional responses are all too clearly in evidence. Snow White herself undergoes a "revirginization" and "apotheosis" at the end of the novel, leaving her fit for no world except a fairy tale. Bill becomes an error-prone skyhero, and the men "depart in search of a new principle. Heigh-ho" (SW 181).

#### Fragments and Re-situation

In his early works, Barthelme explores and struggles with the literary forms through which meanings unfold within patriarchal culture. He discovers that language contributes

to a circularity of power because its ambiguity is tied into patriarchal notions of progress: the broken word can be fixed, the unsatisfactory explanation corrected.<sup>33</sup> Not only does patriarchal culture require that one make a leap of faith should one desire a stable "real" referent for her or his universe, but the necessity for the leap may re-inscribe the notion of a culture that one was seeking to change. Barthelme insists that a more "plausible" way to change the world is to accept that we are unalterably separated from possibilities for complete fulfillment and that we use this distance to our advantage to reduce the oppression of the culture we have been re-inscribing.

In his middle period, Barthelme continues in his literature to deconstruct those forms he sees as contributing to a hegemonic notion of progress, but he also begins tentatively restructuring the forms he shattered in his early works to offer an alternative path. The moral gravity of the purpose he undertakes makes overt forms of humor more disconcerting to him. In fact, in an interview granted to Larry McCaffery in 1980, he himself noted that his writing involved "certainly fewer jokes" (ACH 44) as it evolved over the years. This more somber tendency is crystallized in the title of his collection of short stories from 1972--Sadness.

Perhaps the factor Barthelme finds most sad is that western culture, through its idea of progress, can

accommodate Barthelme's attempts to fragment it. The fragments Barthelme exposed in the hope of disrupting the narrative of patriarchal culture have become part of the proof of the progress of that culture. Alienation from an arcane notion of a unified reality is only the next step of progress. As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh observes in The Mythopoeic Reality, "Contemporary technologies and science have created an evanescent reality which at best can only be partially described but cannot be analyzed and compressed into a total pattern of cohesion and meaning" (MP 20-21). Progress, then, involves both mastering the partial analysis and deriving comfort from it as if it were a holistic explanation. Thus, we are all complicit in rewriting the fictional text of progress. In other words, as Malcolm Bradbury observes, "The gift for creating the fictional illusion of reality [has] shifted from the writer . . . to the culture in which he practices."<sup>34</sup> Since this reality is brought about by contemporary scientific and technological systems, which themselves have been formed through the narrative of progress, it extends a preconceived slate of values that enables it to transfer the comforts derived from accepting the perception of a coherent meaning from the whole to the fragment. The unascertainable fact becomes the interchangeable fact by a leap of faith buttressed by the ambiguity of language and slips in linguistic meaning. Barthelme addresses a fear that what

Judith Bulter proposes as "the multiply contested sites of meaning"<sup>35</sup> may inexorably be bulldozed over in patriarchal culture's relentless insistence on progress.

Thus, Barthelme uses violent images to represent progress, for example, the domestic violence of the contemporary family in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" and the bulldozer that ends the journey of The Dead Father. He sees a totalizing culture at work subtly through its systems. Accordingly, he refers to these systems constantly: religion, economics, science, education become more pointedly the centers of Barthelme's satire. His self-reflective criticism of the artist also becomes more prominent as his stories themselves fringe on becoming systemic. All of these considerations violently culminate in his image of the journey undertaken in The Dead Father as one ultimately forged by bulldozers.

In the interview with McCaffery cited above, Barthelme admits to building from the detritus of cultural ruin. Asked to describe the development of his work, he answers: "A process of accretion. Barnacles growing on a wreck or a rock. I'd rather have a wreck than a ship that sails. Things attach themselves to wrecks . . . after awhile you've got a situation with possibilities" (ACH 34). In other words, he re-addresses the wreckage of the wholes he shattered in his earlier works to examine their generative possibilities.

Barthelme's concern is that these possibilities will be pieced together again according to refigured models of metaphysical completion. He worries that the metafictionists, in their claim of the subjective nature of all systems, are blind to the subjects operating within those systems, and so the new fiction, ostensibly addressing a world without a clear precedent, is still likely to perpetuate a closed system, an idiot circle.

Thus, in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," which updates the critique of daily existence first addressed in "Florence Green is 81," the narrator still sees himself trapped and going in circles. The story begins with the narrator's observation that in his family's daily routine, "[The] evenings lacked promise" (SS 183). He makes it a point to emphasize that he does not anticipate that his situation will improve. However, his familiarity with "lack" gives him an ample vocabulary to address his condition. Whereas the narrator of "Florence Green" stammered and repeated himself, the narrator of "Critique" eloquently recounts the various manifestations of lack in his life: in his conception of self, in his relation to others, and in his relation to social and political institutions.

Yet his affectations are not sufficient to allow him to rise above the sense of daily life. In fact, his narrative occurs in the home, the nexus of daily existence. There,



the narrator is reading the Journal of Sensory Deprivation while his wife is reading Elle. She, he notes, is incited to follow Elle's fashion leads, while his observations suggest he is equally, albeit paradoxically, stimulated by his reading selection. He seeks various forms of sensory deprivation--his consumption of alcohol, his self-absorption--all designed to disengage him from quotidian life so that he may critique it and so rise above it.

The narrator has a pronounced awareness and acceptance of his parameters that enables him, via skeptical rigor, to describe in detail an existence he sees as hopelessly limited. However, this control over his perspective cannot alter his existence beyond allowing him to control its critique. Thus, he is very much aware of the form of his critique. He approaches his life as an accumulation of dissatisfactions, and, given its lack of promise, he looks for ways to make it seem tolerable, convinces himself that he can find "contempt--strike that, content" (SS 184) in his existence. His contrived pun on "contempt" is a result of his complete familiarity with the rhetoric by which he defines himself.<sup>36</sup> In fact, given the extent to which he finds pleasure and purpose in formulating this critique, his life and his critique of it cannot easily be separated, and it is his ability to pun on "contempt" that proves his pleasure. However, since his perspective demands that he

find experiential reality banal, he can record his pleasure only as a kind of bemused dissatisfaction.

In fact, this bemused dissatisfaction frequently cloaks a curious enjoyment the narrator derives from his grasp of the bind within which he sees himself trapped. It is this pleasure that prompts him to speculate about the worth of his existence. For example, he persuades himself that he can find the "fruit of all [his] labors" within the contempt/contentment of his life, all the while realizing that it is a "false insight" (SS 184). His guarded optimism protects a feebly constructed wholeness, contingent on what he sees as his superior grasp of a quotidian existence.

This contentment can be challenged by any request that demands that he participate in his life in a way that goes beyond critiquing it. For example, his son asks for a horse. Acknowledging that it is a "perfectly simple request, in some ways," he nonetheless finds it a "total ruin" to the "state of six-o'clock equilibrium" (SS 194) that he has struggled to achieve. Of course, the narrator does not want simply equilibrium; he desires control. He adjusts his expectations of life downward to gain that control, but nonetheless his control cannot be maintained. He cannot control the weight of his existence despite his precautions to moderate the scale by which he measures it.

In other words, he does not want to reconcile himself to a quotidian life, but to a life of mastery, which he

claims he believes is no longer possible. However, his adjusted life cannot even master the request of child, a simple request inspired by simpler times recognizable from simpler representational forms, such as the movie My Friend Flicka. Since he is unable to accommodate a simple request, his position as martyr to a complex world collapses, and the intellectual rigor that recognizes and defines that world is compromised.

The narrator of "Critique" puts on at least as many airs as the narrator of "Florence Green." If anything, "Critique" is less "realistic" because its tone becomes heavily exaggerated as the narrator becomes intoxicated. This exaggeration contradicts his claim of the "quotidienne," because as he acts, his aberrations from an unimpassioned, everyday response become more personal and thus more "realistically" severe. For example, consider the final resolution to the child crisis:

[so] you push the weeping child with its filmic tears off your lap and onto the floor and turn to your wife, who has been listening to all of this with her face turned to the wall, and no doubt a look upon her face corresponding to that which St. Catherine of Sienna bent upon poor Pope Gregory whilst reproaching him for the luxury of Avignon, if you could see it (but of course you cannot, as her face is turned to the wall)-- . . . inquire in the calmest tones available what is for supper and would she like to take a flying fuck at the moon for visiting this outrageous child upon you. (SS 185)

Despite his "quotidienne" existence, the narrator's treatment of both his child and wife seem "realistically"

cruel, more so, for example, than the casting down of the princess in "The Glass Mountain." The narrator's tone is not "quotidienne": it is an informed and measured (frequently in ounces of liquor) response to a life that is supposed to be lacking. Although it is designed to mediate that lack, this tone comes to attack and contradict it, fueled by a desire for mastery.

Thus, the quotidian life is not. It is in part an attempt at a life of mastery, and in part an attempt to replace one form of mastery with another. What sets it apart from previous classifications of life is its awareness of the fragmentary nature of its existence. This nature is evident in the narrator's belief that he captures his life for us in a series of episodes, each of which offers a moment of existence: the child urinating after crawling into bed with the parents; the narrator's inability to help the child make death masks for a school project; the narrator's attachment to another child while attending father's day at school; his heated checker games with his wife that degenerate into hostility so distracting she misses triple jumps. For the narrator, these moments capture a life measured according to a scale of inadequacy: the child's dampening response to the family moment, the narrator's failure at helping educate his child, the apparent failure of the child to delight the father, even the failure of the missed triple jumps. While the narrator

cannot master the course of his life, he believes, in retrospect, that he can master its presentation.

However, the narrator only succeeds in masking his own conceptual inadequacy. The death masks he shuns comment ironically on the mask he wears in order to see himself as in control of his world. He believes that he gains that control by scrutinizing the episodes of his life until he is content with the results. After separating from his wife, he reflects upon what he believes was the basis of his attraction to her and uncovers "hints of a formerly intact mystery never to be returned to its original wholeness" (SS 189). He admits to a mystery, but is more pleased that he can know it as such. This summary of his break-up reflects his view of life in that he professes no longer to recognize "original wholeness" but still desires a complete understanding of the hints that remain. He tries to replace one form of mastery, of the whole, with another, of the fragment.

To the narrator, such a mastery is a sign of progress, even as he critiques the notion of progress in his effort to reduce life to a measurable scale. For example, the narrator expresses the hope that his entire family is better off after he separates from his wife. Yet "happier" involves placing all of them in situations striving for a cutting-edge mastery. The wife is studying Marxist sociology; the child is at an experimental nursery. This

view of progress initially inspired the narrator to formulate his critique. Ironically, it also leads to his final regress--he last describes himself as finding comfort in the continual consumption of "J&B," suggesting that he is a Job to a world of fragments ("Job" fragmented is "J" & "B"). More to the point, he is like Job only in that he becomes a slave to his own explanatory system.

In "Critique," Barthelme uses the narrator's slip in language between "contempt" and "content" to imply a similar slip in cultural structure. He examines institutional systems that foster and cloak these movements from content to contempt even more directly in "City of Churches." In this story, the function of the church has spilled over into all facets of culture until it eventually comes to burden the populace. The churches of the story all pull "double duty," serving as part church and part everything from hostelry to car rentalship. In this way the churches get everyone "integrated" into the community while maintaining them all in a fragmentary state.

The story sets up a dialectic between Cecilia, a young woman set to take over the city's car rentalship, and the town real estate agent, Mr. Phillips. He is also the spokesman for integration, a man who finds the church's increasing intrusion into daily life "harmless" and points out that people are content with the "usual pattern." This usual pattern traces religion's desire to make everyone part

of an extended community. Barthelme deflates the idealism of such an image of community by making it literal. For example, Mr. Phillips, with cheery banality, notes, "Most people here live with other people" (SS 211).

Cecilia, however thinks in terms of individuality. She finds the presence of the churches "a little creepy" and insists on a room of her own. She has a fear of becoming too entangled with pervasive institutions. When Mr. Phillips presses her about integrating into the community, she responds by telling him that she can will her dreams and dream whatever she wants. She is similar to Burlingame: she does not see "spaghetti dinners," for example, as a proper result of Christianity, and even more like him when she threatens Phillips by suggesting that she can control and project her potentially ominous world of dreams.

However, unlike Burlingame, Cecilia does not have a compulsion to believe. She sees only her "own place" as essential and insists on an individuality out of reach of institutional control. When she explains that her dreams are "mostly sexual things" (SS 212), she asserts the female desire that the churches have sought to suppress. Cecilia, thus, refuses to configure herself in the community of churches, which is imagistically presided over for females by the image of the Virgin Mary.

However, Barthelme does not see self-reliance as a panacea for the problems of semiotic and emotional

uncertainty. The self is forged in the fires of the institution. Mastery of the self is an illusion of progress. For instance, his concern in "Daumier" is with an author who constructs surrogate selves who can "replace" him. Like the narrator of "The Balloon," whose ego extends itself to create a balloon representative of his repressed sexual needs, the narrator of "Daumier" creates surrogates to live for him. He desires this because the various surrogate selves are designed to be "satiabile." Control is the issue--the author researches the self so that he can master the one he creates.

Thus, Barthelme suggests that knowledge of the self is knowledge of a construct pieced together from fragments not indicative of a lost wholeness but of a lost form of "pure" desire. Daumier uncovers a history of the problems with such fragmented selves, the first of which is based on a Freudian paradigm in which part of the self is rapacious with desire. Himself raised in a patriarchy resonant with Freudian images, Daumier sees such rapaciousness in himself. Therefore, his first surrogate is valuable precisely because "[He] knows his limits. He doesn't overstep. Desire has been reduced in him to a minimum. Just enough left to make him go. Loved and respected by all" (SS 215). This self is designed to fit perfectly into a community structure, such as that described in "City of Churches."



Of course, such illusions of self-control come to be dispelled and Daumier progresses to a second, and even more fragmented, postulation of the self reflecting a post-structural influence: he creates imbedded selves in imbedded texts. However, this "new" narrative proves to be insatiable in its own way when Daumier can no longer control his various texts, and he becomes enamored of, and devoured by, his textual creations. Jealous of his surrogate's desires, the author takes the place of the creation, making himself a piece of fiction and textually enacting the "death of the author."

Barthelme thus sets up a double bind. On the one hand, if people tighten their grip on the forces influencing the formulation of the self (i.e. become artists or embrace the church), they waste their life working toward achieving an inadequate "perfection." On the other hand, if they lose control of themselves, they can become edited like texts, too passive to change their roles in the community. Daumier falls prey to this loss of control: as the story concludes he is moving in with a female character whome he created but who is now intent on changing his lifestyle, in effect recreating him. Barthelme's concern, as one of the characters in "Daumier" puts it, is that you can become "banjaxed there, with the iddyological" (SS 228), and so unable to act.

This is so because, for Barthelme, the ideological is beyond anyone's control even where it is most obviously a construct. For example, in "The Party," academicians, a class of thinkers frequently understood (by themselves) to be highly aware of the influences of ideology, find their lives transformed into even greater banality by their ability to account for and explain away the complexities of life. For example, "King Kong" slips from being a character in a fictional horror genre discussed at a party; he is "an adjunct professor of art history at Rutgers" (SS 232). The horror genre that Burlingame invoked for his personal advantage to challenge simplistic notions of religious community has here been commodified to such an extent that Kong's appearance is treated as a routine occurrence at the party.

Knowledge, then, always includes a longing for some degree of completeness. For example, the narrator of "The Party" observes, "The mind carries you with it, away from what you are supposed to do, toward things that cannot be explained rationally, toward difficulty, lack of clarity, late afternoon light" (SS 233). Ostensibly the key to future progress, knowledge is now characterized by nostalgic references to a simpler past. In "The Party," for instance, there are frequent references to historical figures who asserted variant perspectives in the midst of difficult times: Kafka, Kleist, Richelieu. Their perspectives have

since become part of an academic tradition, suggesting a cycle, another "idiotic circle," that leads the narrator to an awareness of an enfeebled view of correctness: "of course we did everything right, insofar as we were able to imagine what "right" was" (SS 235). His own demystification of ideological "certainties" has led the narrator into a miasma that ironically re-inscribes a nostalgia for mystification.<sup>37</sup> Like the narrator of "Critique," he possesses a "Wonderful elegance!" which he notes is "No good at all" (SS 235). His is a statement of particularly enfeebling paradoxes about progress: one gains control by acknowledging loss of control, and knowledge becomes the bastion of commodified, banal tradition.

In this way too much information fosters a slippage of language that leads us to re-invent the same community that people had sought to transcend or to explain away. It does so by making people accept that to know that they do not know is the extent of the mastery they can attain. For example, the narrator of "The Rise of Capitalism" observes, "But now that I have understood that I have not understood capitalism, perhaps a less equivocal position toward it can be 'hammered out'" (204-205). He has reached the fulfillment of knowing but will retain the tentativeness of not knowing that makes change unlikely. Capitalism, itself, by being complex and spilling over into all reaches of the narrator's life (like the churches in "City of Churches"),

encourages this position. Consider the narrator's characterization of it: "Everyone is talking about capitalism (although some people are talking about the psychology of aging, and some about the human use of human beings, and some about the politics of experience)" (207-208).

Since the narrator's knowledge of his lack of understanding still reflects that lack, his knowledge is only ironically restored and restorative. An idiot circle will be re-inscribed as long as he is compelled to seek mastery. Thus, the story concludes by suggesting that an abandonment of ratiocination may be the sole enabling position for the postmodern subject: "Doubt is a necessary precondition to meaningful action. Fear is the great mover, in the end" (SS 208). Doubt can lead to meaning precisely because it rejects meaning as totalizing. However, even this affirmation of doubt is dubious, since it was uncertainty that originally launched the narrator into contriving a new form of mastery.

It is with such tentative optimism about meaningful doubt that Barthelme undertakes the expedition of The Dead Father. Overall, this trek addresses the stated goals of meta-fiction by attempting to kill off the patriarchal figurehead and open the way for a new fiction as history. However, while Barthelme easily finds a plethora of ways to discredit patriarchy, he ultimately hedges at offering

alternatives to the void its death would leave. Part of his reticence results from his recognition that it is not patriarchy, per se, that is repressive; it is its totalizing historical evolution. Any ready institutional remedy is likely to replicate that evolution.

As in the case of most of Barthelme's work, the plot of The Dead Father exposes teleological development as an idiot circle. For example, Jerome Klinkowitz notes that the novel has one inexorable purpose: "Beginning, middle, and end are clear from the start, as the task of hauling the Dead Father to his grave has only one possible destination, as inevitable as the progress of life itself."<sup>38</sup> Yet at the same time, the journey to dispose of the Dead Father must be taken by every subject under the father's yoke. Although it is singular and preordained, it is also multiple and repetitive, and unpredictable. Thus, the novel also critiques the ways such circles are passed down.

Stanley Trachtenberg suggests that the novel rejects cyclical history "through a journey no one is anxious to make and which will leave matters in much the same condition as when they began."<sup>39</sup> And indeed, seen from one perspective, the journey is empty both practically and metaphysically. Yet everyone is aware that he or she must take it. Barthelme suggests that such is the inevitability of fatherdom in a patriarchy. The exceptional point in The Dead Father is that all the characters are also becoming

aware of the ties that bind them to this journey. It is significant that, like the Dead Father himself, all the characters are types who begin the journey bound by the enterprise but throughout the journey question those ties that bind them.

They are bound to make this journey because foremost among the problems of fatherdom is its omnipresence. The Dead Father is "Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead (DF 3). One cannot get rid of him since, figuratively, he has all the bases covered. The Wends, for instance, observe of him that he likes to have it both ways, a point he emphasizes to Julie when he explains, "All lines my lines. All figures and all ground mine, out of my head" (DF 19). This inclusiveness suggests that all levels of signification, be they psychological, philosophical, historical, mythic, or political, in some way converge in the repetitious forms contained within fatherdom. Thus, the Dead Father himself is part mechanized institution:

The left leg, entirely mechanical, said to be the administrative center of his operations, working ceaselessly night and day through all hours for the good of all. In the left leg, in sudden tucks or niches, we find things we need. Facilities for confession, small booths with sliding doors, people are noticeably freer in confessing to the Dead Father than to any priest, of course! he's dead. The confessions are taped, scrambled, recomposed, dramatized, and then appear in the city's theaters, a new feature-length film every Friday. One can recognize moments of one's own, sometimes. (DF 4)

Thus, in any configuration of the self, one also sees the father. This is why the Dead Father is described in personal terms, why he is humanized, and in symbolic terms, why he is lionized. Both the personal and symbolic aspects must be considered in order to analyze fatherdom's historic importance. Lois Gordon, for example, sees The Dead Father as an expanded agent of authority interpreting an inadequate index of reality. She observes that in The Dead Father, Barthelme "expands his emblem of the word--the D.F.--and has it include any particularized belief system (honor, law, truth, tradition, art) and any human experience (the parent) which creates and structures one's reality."<sup>40</sup> The Dead Father, then, is trapped in a double bind: he is an emblem of a system and a person subject to the rules of that system. In Barthelme's vision, coming to grips with this double bind is the only journey the subject can take.

By similar logic, every character faces his or her own double bind. Each has a paradigmatic role defined under patriarchal rules, and each must live realizing he or she has such a script. For instance, Thomas, as a son, must play out the father-son ambivalence pervasive throughout the generations. Destined someday to be responsible for authority, he mimics his father's words and deeds; yet, not worthy of that authority unless he attains personal autonomy, he is rebellious toward and wary of his relationship to the Dead Father. Gordon describes his

dilemma as being "torn between rejecting and relying upon the givens of his world" (Gordon 163). Yet Gordon's description exemplifies one of the givens of his world. Thomas is always set between contradictions.

For example, Thomas accumulates the possessions and the authority of the father and yet remains a son "in the fullest sense" (DF 33). Thomas's problem is not really a dilemma; he cannot choose to do the "right" thing because there is no right thing to be done. He explains this bind to his men when they question the morality of their enterprise: "Things are not simple! Error is always possible, even with the best intentions in the world. People make mistakes. Things are not done right. Right things are not done. There are cases which are not clear. You must be able to tolerate the anxiety. To do otherwise is to jump ship, ethics-wise" (DF 93). Thomas's insistence that one must tolerate the anxiety is similar to the narrator's desire in "The Glass Mountain" to find a plausible symbol. The difference is that the simplicity that the narrator of "The Glass Mountain" can reject is replaced in The Dead Father by a complexity that Thomas must tolerate. This heightened awareness of the diverse extrinsic factors that impede the "proper" course of any journey is the dimension Barthelme adds to his characters as they move through The Dead Father. The reason that his



characters may seem internally shallow is that they choke in external complexity.

The female characters, Julie and Emma, also fulfill stereotypical roles, roles that are important primarily as they pertain to the father/son power struggle. Hence, whether they recognize their destiny is not as pronounced an issue as it is for the men, either to themselves or to many readers. (Gordon, for instance, does little more than mention them in her analysis of the novel's political dialectics.) Women are depicted as a constant but distracting presence. For example, when defining parents, Julie describes the mother as "a grime . . . [an] overall presence distributed in discrete small black particles all over everything" (DF 77). And in The Dead Father mother "particles" are all over everything, but only as Thomas and the Dead Father distribute them. The instability of their existence demonstrates their historic exploitation and comments upon what has been considered their limited personal capacity.

Julie is mother/lover/wife. She is a proper descendant of Eve: a Freudian conflation of the virgin/whore dichotomy and the Victorian angel of the house. For example, after an altercation with the Dead Father, Thomas feels unable to lead the journey and in a symbolic gesture casts away his sword. He turns to Julie for comfort and asks for "a suck of the breast" (DF 10) to restore him. After Julie obliges

him, Thomas is able to reclaim his sword and proceed with the journey. Julie restores his moral authority through an act that appears at once maternal and sexual, but nonetheless an act that literalizes the notion of the milk of human kindness. A similar conflation of sexual mores ostensibly in opposition occurs when Julie asks Thomas to accompany her behind the bushes for "a taste" and Thomas first anoints her feet to make her "immaculate" (DF 69).

Julie is always measured according to historic stereotypical designations of women. As lover, she is valued for her appearance. Thomas, for example, after publically professing to be her lover, suggests that he is so only because she has not yet lost her beauty altogether. In her capacity as wife, Julie is the domestic--she suggests when the troupe should lunch, and at this time she may head the table or produce the seating plan, her only moments of authority. Otherwise, she performs chores such as doing laundry around the campfire. As mother, Julie is the means of production. At one point in the novel, her body is claimed by the men as their "stomach" (DF 31). In this symbolic role, she is a virgin mother as well. For example, when Thomas, who has publically proclaimed himself her lover, approaches her in sight of the workers, he is told not to touch her, lest he be castigated as a rogue. Similarly, when the troupe encounter an alien culture, the Wends, they immediately recognize Julie as "mother."

For her part, Julie has internalized much of the stereotyped recognition she receives. Describing her past to Thomas, she confesses to having "many men," whom she admits to controlling through "a great deal of care-of-the-body" (DF 81). Acting out this role of lover for Thomas at a bar, she incites a game of "Button, button" and proclaims her importance by acknowledging that she's "got the button" (DF 30). Once that button has been obtained by Thomas, Julie pushes for Thomas to seal their relationship, insisting to the reluctant Thomas that it should be "the two of us . . . damn it, can't you get this simple idea into your head? The two of us against the is" (DF 68). When Thomas hesitates, Julie confirms his fears by acting out the role of castrating female and attacking his scrotum.

Since Julie is familiarly known by her various designations as "woman," she can be possessed. Thomas performs an appropriate possession ritual when he inscribes his signature on Julie's stomach with her lipstick. In this way he demonstrates his authority over her womb and demonstrates the superiority of the logos (coded male) over the flesh (coded female). He also brands her a possession, whose worth is centered on her reproductive capabilities. Finally, the lipstick itself suggests masculine control of the subject. It is a phallic symbol that women apply to their lips to be made more feminine, enacting Irigaray's

conception of the female as a reflection of masculine views of femininity.<sup>41</sup>

As Julie represents and enacts Eve's legacy, Emma represents Lilith and enacts hers.<sup>42</sup> Emma is as old as Julie, but she has been excluded from the original band of travellers. As the journey progresses, she is picked up along the way. Her appearance, characterized by a "pouty bosom" and a "merry eye" (DF 21), immediately disrupts the chemistry of the troupe. Emma and Julie engage directly in a staring contest, suggesting the competition between women that serves as a counterpoint to the comraderie of the men. (Emma, for example, is described as sulking when Julie's stomach is claimed by the workmen.) When Emma and Julie finally speak, Emma inquires about the men, especially concerning how they perform sexually. While Julie is constant, Emma is flirtatious, and while Julie does laundry, Emma re-organizes her reticule.

Emma's wantonness contrasts to Julie's devotion. She interviews each of the men in the troupe "for her files" (DF 71). Even the Dead Father, who makes indirect proposals to Julie, recognizes Emma's experience and asks her directly to go to bed with him. Her wantonness is taken to an exaggerated extreme when she cavorts with apes (literally) who crash a dance; she exclaims that it is the best dance she has ever attended as she glides with an ape to the "Penetration Waltz."

While Emma and Julie embody distinct types, their roles are not exact. Their function can change at the men's discretion, since men determine how their femininity is distributed, and it can change as well according to their own caprice, since that is also a stereotypical attribute of women. For instance, Julie on occasion lacks modesty and publicly exposes her breasts (and at the novel's conclusion, Thomas requires that she expose her "fleece" as a final gesture to the Dead Father), while Emma eschews an overture from the Dead Father by going on about her facility for preparing salads.

When together, Julie and Emma compound stereotypical notions of femininity. It is as if there were a function built into the form of femininity that ensures that their relations with one another do more to substantiate their designation as women than challenge it. Kathy Acker describes a similar scenario in Great Expectations when she suggests that according to a Freudian paradigm, female role models block the development of femininity. In The Dead Father, this blocking is apparent when the conversations between Emma and Julie pit them against each other. For example, upon first speaking to Emma, Julie suggests that it is "time to go," to which Emma responds, "Is that a threat?" (DF 23). Later, Julie directly threatens Emma by suggesting she will give her "a shirtful of sore tit" (DF 60), underscoring how the physical fact of Emma's presence poses

a threat to her femininity. One should also note that the form of the women's conversation is less coherent than the dialogues between them and the men or those of the men among themselves. In effect, their talk wanders like the hysteria historically diagnosed as an excess of femininity. Julie even notes that her moods can change frequently because she "ignore[s] sense data" (DF 49), again internalizing a character historically ascribed.

The other members of Thomas's contingent are also types. Only Edmund, the grand failure of a son, stands out among them. For the acquisition of the father's possessions he has substituted acquisition of a flask that he can always reproduce despite Thomas's constant efforts to toss it aside. Edmund's recurrent flask is not much different from the belt buckle and sword that Thomas acquires. Each suggests the male taking hold of a phallic symbol for security. The difference is that Thomas uses his acquisitions to prepare him to replace the Dead Father, while Edmund continually drains his acquisition so that he cannot replace him. In effect, Edmund continually makes himself flaccid; his flask is also a disembodied breast that cannot affirm his resolve, as Julie's breast does for Thomas. It is no wonder, then, that upon trying to seduce Emma, Edmund merely earns in her eyes the "status of least-favored-nation" (DF 70). It is not a coincidence that his lack of sexual prowess is criticized in political terms,

since the power of the father determines leaders. However, Edmund and Thomas are alike in that because they both depend upon a phallic economy, they are subject to the yoke of the Dead Father and belong together on his journey.

The rest of the men are called "galoots" by the Dead Father and "volunteers" (DF 10) by Thomas. They do most of the work and get little reward. They are tied to the patriarchal economy by their desire to pull the "cable" of the Dead Father, a tie equally demonstrated by the value they place on the stomach of the mother. By their protestations to Thomas it is evident that even they do not wish to take this journey that offers them little reward and less solace; yet the fact that they are interchangeable, even dismissable, suggests as much as anything else the need for the journey to kill off the Dead Father.

The Dead Father's original authority is steeped in tradition. Symbolizing patriarchal authority, his head appears first at the beginning of the novel. The head is capacious, appropriate for the site of the logos, with plenty of space for knowledge. The eyes are open, involved in "decades of staring" (DF 3), ensuring that this head is alert, aware of its rule. Certain stained teeth in the jaw are attributed to tobacco juice, "according to legend" (DF 3). Barthelme emphasizes the strength and nobility of the jaw, but with a hitch: "the jawline compares favorably to a rock formation. Imposing, rugged, all that" (DF 3). The

concession to the form of tradition as "all that" undercuts tradition's austerity and sets the tone for the novel. We are reminded, for example, of the ominous (and comic) "etc"'s that end sections of "View of My Father Weeping." Barthelme suggests that the legend of patriarchy is an "etcetera" likely to continue well after the father is dead.

In fact, it is through his death that the father gains much of his status. The Dead Father is compared to various mythic fathers who feature in a succession of mythic cycles. Each father dies off only to speak from the grave to the father who succeeds him, just as the Dead Father will do to Thomas as this novel ends. The Dead Father borrows the voices of such disparate characters as Zeus, Prometheus, Oedipus, the Fisher King, King Lear and various characters of Beckett and Joyce. The value of being dead, in terms of authority, extends beyond the consecration the hero attains at his demise. Death becomes the powerful force of history when the stories of dead fathers are recounted, and this connection reveals myth as "the privileged locus where language and history blend."<sup>43</sup> Barthelme will return to this consideration of the mythic story as history again in The King.

As myth, the Dead Father can both create and retain authority, since the mythic system allows the father to speak with the voice of history and yet give it his own words, both keeping and altering its form. As noted



earlier, the Dead Father likes to have it both ways. This ability to retain and alter mythic truth is like the scout mysteries Bill is supposed to learn in order to be a leader in Snow White. Thus, for example, the Dead Father is allowed to slip the cable that keeps him in line to go on slaying rampages.

Death is born into the patriarchal relation between father and son from its earliest western manifestations. The birth of a son poses a threat to the father in the Greek myth of Cronus and the birth of Zeus and in the myth of Oedipus. The death of fathers and the deaths of sons are constituent fragments of fatherdom. In The Dead Father, the Dead Father admits that he "had to devour [his children], hundreds, thousands . . ." even though he "never wanted it" (DF 18). Correspondingly, Thomas's design from the novel's outset is to have the Dead Father bulldozed over in a ravine.

Any tragic conception of death, then, is downplayed. Death becomes part of the culture, not only in the sense that the Dead Father's rampages can easily be translated into cultural facts, but also in the sense that the Dead Father's law kills off the possibilities for diverse identities. As Julie points out when the Dead Father offhandedly remarks, "You take my meaning," "We had no choice" (DF 19). His own inevitable death is not depicted as a death so much as a routine transitional period in the

progress of patriarchal order. It is culturally justified because the Dead Father is an "old fart," and his groping to remain the center of attention (like Florence Green's) has become as distasteful as his attempts at groping Julie or Emma. These violations are a part of his law, but the part that mandates that he be succeeded. No wonder the text says, "He is not perfect, thank god for that" (DF 3). The "perfection" of the patriarchal system is in its own way contingent on its not being perfect, allowing for the succession of a "new" mythic regime. Thanking "god" for this perfection is an ironic redundancy.

It is through the repeated journeys taking dead fathers to their demise that mythic values have filtered down to the contemporary world. The administrative leg of the Dead Father can adapt to cultural changes enough to force those changes to adapt to it. In other words, in one of his dimensions or another the Dead father is always on one's mind. This is because so many levels of human experience have been explained in phallogocentric terms. For example, Gordon notes how the Dead Father is the disembodied god of culture and morality, the "Everyman-as-artist" struggling for originality, the Oedipal father, the archetypal father, and the father in anthropological, literary, philosophical, and other contexts (Gordon 162). Thus, in one context or another, everyone is in the Dead Father's livery. In this way, in order for life to proceed as usual, the Dead Father

must remain dead. The narrator of the introduction observes, "We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead" (DF 5). However, as the text comments on just how intrusive fatherdom is, the desire to kill the Dead Father takes on an increasingly hostile dimension.

It is through its awareness of fatherdom as a construct that the novel suggests change. In the text of "A Manual for Sons," which appears within the narrative of The Dead Father, Barthelme points out "twenty-two kinds of fathers" (DF 136), most bizarre and parodic, such as "leaping fathers" (DF 119), "inadvertent fathers" (DF 122), and "Buckskin-colored fathers [who] know the Law" (DF 132). Teresa L. Ebert comments on what such classifications expose:

By enmeshing the signifier of father in these absurd, parodic networks of signifiers, Barthelme cuts off the father from its common web of signifiers--which mimesis represents as "natural," real referents of an essential being--and shows the constructedness of the father in and through discourse. In doing so, he inhibits the naturalization of father as "real" referent, for it is through such representations that patriarchal ideology creates the illusion that the position, power, and practices of the father are "natural," inevitable, and thus resistant to change.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, the novel takes a turn on what is natural in the death of fathers, challenging patriarchal succession by altering a discourse that has created the illusion that it is resistant to change. The manner in which the Dead Father is killed off depends on the degree to which one sees the discourse of

the journey as changed. Barthelme suggests different ways it might change through the novel's various characters.

As it concerns Thomas, we need to determine whether his discourse changes merely to accommodate his natural succession or changes to challenge the notion of succession. From Thomas's first dramatic narrative, a response to the Dead Father's boastings, he demonstrates his ambivalence about fatherdom. Thomas recounts learning the son's lesson that he should feel like "murdering" the father. The excess of "murder" in Barthelme's form of the word underscores how Thomas has learned the lessons of fatherdom only too well. He then proceeds to take the Dead Father's belt buckle, the first father possession, suggesting that he is preparing to succeed him. His subsequent account of his personal history describes developing the "usual" skills of a son--ranging from higher education to "truckling" to marriage--preparing him for fatherdom. Since he has done nothing exceptional to prepare him for fatherdom, he will perpetuate the status quo, even though he finds it a burden. Ebert explains the son's burden by pointing out that "the son, whether as heir or surrogate father, is required to do the work of patriarchy, to act as an agent of the law of the Father . . . The son, in other words, is always deeply implicated and dependent on the very patriarchal order he struggles against" (PP 78). Thus, Thomas performs "leadership functions" and "likes telling everybody what to

do" (DF 66). Julie even accuses him of perpetuating father myths.

In other words, Thomas has been disdainful of fatherdom, but in all the proper ways; even in his ambivalence, he has been protective of it. It is in this mode of the obedient son that he comes across "A Manual for Sons" and gets some final advice for killing off the father:

Patricide is bad, first because it is contrary to law and custom and second because it proves, beyond a doubt, that the father's every fluted accusation against you was correct . . . Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in an attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him . . . Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least "turned down" in this generation--by the combined efforts of all of us together. (DF 145)

As he did by using the actions of the seven dwarves as an alternative to patriarchal oppression in Snow White, Barthelme is once again trying to scale down the problems with patriarchy. Yet, also as in Snow White, the scaled-down system reflects the problems of the larger version. Thomas, for example seems increasingly dictatorial as he acquires more of the Dead Father's possessions. For instance, he is described as violating the "rules" of sex with Julie, and when the horseman following the troupe turns out to be the Mother, Thomas routinely dispatches her to the store with a grocery list. Nonetheless, Thomas does "lessen" the Dead Father by proceeding to bulldoze him over.

The Dead Father's final oratory suggests a similarly

questionable possibility for change. Early in the novel, the Dead Father recounts a tale of his fathering, a tale full of bombast that compares his exploits favorably to those of mythic heroes such as Zeus and Achilles. As he realizes his fate, however, his final soliloquy parodies the prose of Finnegans Wake. In one sense, Finnegans Wake can be seen as the literalization of the myth that by not making sense does make sense and so perpetuates itself. (Finnegans Wake, comes full circle in form, but reaches this closure via discourse that purposely evades conventional notions of understanding.) By mimicking the Wake, the Dead Father may be closing his own mythic tale as he prepares for Thomas's succession. However, his speech may also represent the Dead Father's acknowledgement of a fragmented world in which his discourse cannot pretend to achieve mastery and in which the previously unchallengeable authority of fathers will be reduced.

Thus, Barthelme's most promising possibility for change lies outside of the masculine rhetoric and in the conversations between Julie and Emma. At first glance, these conversations appear to occur within patriarchal boundaries. At first, Julie and Emma are combatants acting out an historical enmity between women as nurtured within a patriarchal system. Their conversations are also reactive instead of active. (The first three occur as responses to unpleasantries brought about by their presence amongst the

men.) Lastly, these conversations seem to be a brand of hysteria themselves; they wander and do not seem to make conventional sense.

However, as the novel moves toward abandoning the Dead Father, and "masculine" narrative along with him, it invites new associations to be made from the speech of Emma and Julie. Such a reconfiguring is prefaced by the women's response to the Dead Father's account of fathering:

It is obvious that but for a twist of fate we and not they would be calling the tune, said Julie.

It is obvious that but for a twist of fate the mode of the music would be different, said Emma. Much different. (DF 39)

And as fate twists again, the women's conversations seem to represent that new music. As they recur, they begin to make a kind of sense, similar to what the seven men seek in Snow White. One can infer references to a broad spectrum of cultural experiences ranging from the journey, and the women's personal relations with Thomas and the men, to the more general cultural conditions of women within a patriarchy. This linkage builds confidence between them, and they initiate their last conversation as a response to the Dead Father's burial and what it means to them.

To some critics, this conversation suggests the dawning of an alternative to fatherdom. Jerome Klinkowitz, for example, calls the notion of the feminine "a counterforce (and successor) to Dead Fatherhood" (DBAE 96). From Barthelme's perspective, Emma and Julie are more accustomed

to the fragments that reflect the world more accurately than meaningful wholes, and thus might be the best vessels through which to reconfigure a more plausible reality. In this way, Emma and Julie become what Acker might call legitimate heirs of discourse. However, this legitimacy poses its own problems, the foremost among them that the formulaic and predictable nature of its development goes against Barthelme's critique of progress. This problem is underscored when the novel concludes with the curt description "Bulldozers" (DF 177).

#### Fragments and Re-integration

At the end of The Dead Father some critics have noted a measure of sincere pathos in Barthelme's treatment of the Dead Father's demise.<sup>45</sup> This sympathy arises from his recognition that one cannot simply "bulldoze" over the problems of patriarchy. On the one hand, such a bulldozing follows the time-honored path of sons succeeding fathers and so leaves the progressive, totalizing system intact. On the other, even if successful, by its own violence it establishes the foundations for another totalizing perspective to arise from the fragments of its predecessor.

The dilemma described above has two particularly notable influences on Barthelme's later work. First, it increases the somberness of his tone. Not surprisingly,



then, Charles Molesworth embellishes the title of one of Barthelme's earlier short story collections when describing the salient characteristic of Barthelme's final novel, The King, as that of "profound sadness."<sup>46</sup> In his later works Barthelme does his best to continue to privilege fragmentations that are ironic, parodic and cynical about patriarchal myth as history. However, he is not as brash and cocky in his disruptive approach to that myth as he was in Come Back Dr. Caligari or Snow White, having become himself a writer established enough to be considered mainstream. Barthelme thus assumes the role of a reluctant representative of myth, playing with that myth as one of its resigned spokesmen but still hoping to stand it on its head. In one respect, Barthelme writes against his own veneration; in this way, he hopes to alter the veneration afforded any cultural icons and lessen the brunt of patriarchal oppression.

Secondly, his writings are more pointedly historical. By the end of The Dead Father, Barthelme realizes that he has been addressing the paradox of trying to improve on patriarchy and by so doing trying to improve on a system that thrives on the notion of progress. Thus, he focuses more toward the history of progress as it has evolved through institutions such as the arts, the sciences, and even architecture. Barthelme critiques the desire for progress in these areas as concurrently a desire to re-

inscribe myth. He relies on one particularly ironic understanding of myth as what Gregory Lucente calls "the term par excellence for falsehood" (NR 36) and privileges this understanding over its equally traditional connotation as a term for higher understanding. In effect, he attempts to take the historical notion of the meaningful whole and draw out the fragments in our understanding of it.

In Barthelme's later works, realist discourse's assumption of the possibility for worldly representation is forcibly combined with mythic discourse's assumption of a unified idealization.<sup>47</sup> The resulting "single" discourse is then measured against Barthelme's version of the history of patriarchal culture. This history, through the violence of his ironic and parodic reshaping, depicts patriarchal culture as crumbling at various sites (the violence he describes imitative of the historical violence of patriarchal culture, except to a lesser degree), and Barthelme examines the resulting detritus to try to determine how to reconfigure the still somewhat patriarchal culture even less violently.<sup>48</sup> In other words, where Barthelme previously approached history confident that he could expose its foundations as crumbling, he now sees that crumbling as the foundation of history "proper," and so he tries to make it crumble into a less oppressive form. Accordingly, in The King, he turns increasingly to using his

female characters as guides to help to determine the shape that form will take.

To a great extent, then, Barthelme's tone results from his re-evaluation of history. For example, Molesworth suggests an anomie in Barthelme's later works brought about in part by what he calls a mythic longing in Barthelme for a "utopian dream, a place where all cultural references are equally available to everyone" (NE 105). Thus, in The King, Molesworth, paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, sees Barthelme "shoring up certain fragments against our cultural and historical ruin" (NE 105). If Molesworth is correct, the "itselfness" of the fragment that made it separate from cultural history is now an "itselfness" that protects aspects of that same culture from historical ruin. If true, the process Molesworth describes reverses the strategy of Snow White, in which Barthelme hurled fragments at the historical form in the hope of ruining it. Molesworth recognizes and tries to obfuscate the thematic reversal he suggests when he subsequently maintains that "one can say with almost total certainty that any idea directly voiced or defended by any character [in The King] is precisely what Barthelme is rejecting" (NE 106). Therefore, it is problematic to say what it is, in Molesworth's view, that Barthelme hopes to protect. If Barthelme is protecting history, it is only to insist on its fragmented form, so that he can work to allow

previously marginalized fragments a more prominent place in its shifting structure.

However, Barthelme realizes that any structure is likely to maintain a large degree of its original integrity. Molesworth also seems to recognize this fact when he observes a nostalgia for violence that coincides with the mythic longing he ascribes to Barthelme. It was this violence that originally led to the exclusion of voices in patriarchal structures (as Emma and Julie's were excluded throughout The Dead Father), and it is this violence that preconditions sadness as an assumption of Barthelme's later works. For example, in The King, the violence of culture is dramatized as the ceaseless condition of war. War in fact appears as history in that it unites King Arthur and mythic origins with World War II. Thus, Barthelme acknowledges that he must to some degree keep and reapply violence in his own fragmentation strategy. This violence is channeled into his attempts to reduce what he sees as the metaphysical importance of myth by breaking down the institutions through which this importance is built. These institutions then become the subject matter of Barthelme's work, and so in breaking them down he is simultaneously trying to break down the violence that is his own legacy. As Molesworth puts it, he must attempt to "sing with and against the tune" (NE 107).

Paradigmatic of Barthelme's treatment of simultaneously building and breaking down structure is the short story "They call for more structure . . . " from Overnight to Many Distant Cities. The story's narrator is part of a construction crew attempting to build a utopian city that is to be the perfect synthesis of old and new. It is sufficiently advanced in planning to make "architects stutter" and "Chambers of Commerce burst into flame"; yet it gives its due to its past and will have "[its] own witch doctors and strange gods aplenty" (ON 9). At the same time that it incorporates the latest technology, advanced enough to create a "new river," it is bio-friendly in that "areas of the city . . . ha[ve] been designed to rot, fall into desuetude, return, in time, to open spaces [where] fawns would one day romp" (ON 10).

By its comprehensiveness, this plan is mythic, and so it contains its own mystery of regeneration: the narrator notes, "The little girl dead behind the rosebushes came back to life, and the passionate construction continued" (ON 10). However, the resurrectional powers of structure are undermined in the story by the word "Fastigium," defined as "a set of letters selected for the elegance of the script" (ON 10), into whose shape the city is to be built. The adjective "fastigate" means narrowing toward the top; thus, this fastigium suggests that the city's structure is building toward a mythic height replete with the problems of

myth as laid out in The Dead Father and Snow White. The passion of the project is displaced by the elegance of the script it supports, an elegance that emphasizes that the city is valuable more as an appearance than an accomplishment. In effect, the work kills more than it resurrects.

Physical structures are not the only buildings whose construction Barthelme challenges. In "The Genius," from Forty Stories, he critiques the process through which knowledge is constructed. This story is a series of moments ostensibly capturing the life and essence of a genius.<sup>49</sup> In Barthelme's view, genius traverses the terrain of impossible advancement. For example, from the outset, we are told that the genius desires to make his assistants "failure proof," though at the same time he "wishes to place them in situations where only failure is possible" (FS 17). He points out, "This is an age of personal ignorance. No one knows what others know. No one knows enough" (FS 17). These strictures make the genius seem more important. His status suggests he knows what in Snow White are called the "scout mysteries." Yet the genius, himself, does not know enough. For instance, he cannot bear to take his driver's exam because of the way it would involve him in the mundanity of the everyday world, and so he writes to the motor vehicle division in his capacity as genius in order to

convince its officials to reinstate his license for him. Of course, they comply.

They comply, as any representatives of a patriarchal institution would, because they recognize the importance of the historical notion of genius. Not surprisingly, then, the genius has all the attitudes and deportment of a mythic figure. For example, he postures privately in front of a mirror after reading Theodore Dreisser's The Genius, and he employs similar posturing in public when, for instance, "[he] smokes thoughtfully" (FS 20) when a group of students challenges the notion of genius. Also, like a mythic patriarch, the genius "hates children," realizing that one day one of them will succeed him.

The irony of the genius's insistence on his status is that it entraps him within a closed system that does not need the contributions of his genius, just its presence. His importance is largely symbolic. For example, he wins one award "for his future work" (FS 19), suggesting that his station is more important for the ceremony it invites than for any benefits it can produce. Thus, the genius internalizes a position that precedes him. He recognizes this precedence to the extent that he sees his importance as securely scripted in culture, to which his own rationale for genius, which inextricably ties it to history, attests: "He has devoted considerable thought to an attempt to define the sources of his genius. However this attempt has led

approximately nowhere. The mystery remains a mystery. He has therefore settled upon the following formula, which he repeats each time he is interviewed: 'Historical forces' (FS 18).

The genius does not realize that these forces overdetermine his existence. Instead, he sees himself as a natural element of history and so compelled to contribute to its progress: "The genius proposes a world inventory of genius, in order to harness and coordinate the efforts of genius everywhere to create a better life for all men" (FS 23).<sup>50</sup> His initiative generates a "staggering" response and overwhelming praise. This response is the effect of genius. It reauthorizes authority before the act. However, the genius's initiative is reclaimed within his symbolic function. The world inventory of genius is turned into a ceremony in which "three thousand geniuses [meet] in one hall" (FS 23).

Barthelme attempts to put this symbolic reduction into perspective. The genius sulks over the transmogrification of his project. One may think this is a moment of personal enlightenment for him, but Barthelme suggests it has more to do with his estrangement from a past in which he sees himself as empowered. For instance, he is revived from his ill humor by a ceremonial sword delivered to him, revivifying him by metaphorically restoring his phallus.



Barthelme sees the function of genius as being limited to the circular design of showcasing genius and thus buttressing mythic longings for progress and from this progress again rediscovering genius. Therefore, Barthelme adopts the attitude of a smartass juvenile when describing what "real" effect the genius can have: "In the serenity of his genius, the genius reaches out to right wrongs--the sewer system of cities, for example" (FS 21). The genius's work belongs in the sewer because it does not translate into actions but rather into the abstractions of "good" intentions, which conveniently re-inscribe patriarchy--and for Barthelme, that stinks.

Barthelme does not limit himself to critiquing how secular knowledge is constructed. In "January," also from Forty Stories, he introduces another genius, Thomas Brecker, an expert in metaphysics and religion. The story takes the form of an interview between a reporter and the aging theologian, Brecker. Brecker's concerns involve the relation of the self to culture. He continually finds himself in a quandary about how the self should act: "There's a relief in submission to authority and that's a psychological good. At the same time, we consider submission a diminishment of the individual, which we criticize" (FS 250). In other words, the man who has made himself an expert on authorization finds himself in a bind about authority:

The "good news" is always an announcement of reconciliation of the particular into the universal. I have a lifelong tendency not to want to be absorbed into the universal, which amounts to saying a lifelong resistance to the forms of religion. But not to religious thought, which I consider of the greatest importance. It's a paradox, maybe a fruitful one, I don't know. Looking at myself, I say, hubris, maybe, the sin of pride, again, but this feeling exists and at least I can look at it, try to understand it, try to figure out how widespread it is. That is, are there others who feel this way? Again a paradox, a movement toward the universal: I don't want to be the only one who wants to be out on a limb. Or I'm seeking validation from outside, etc. etc. (FS 255-256)

Becker knows too much and thus cannot have any certitude. Ironically, he professes a desire for faith, a transcendent form of certitude that is perhaps regressive in terms of knowledge. Thus, the "progress" of knowledge moves backwards. Becker's world is defined by such paradoxes. To some degree, he revels in them: "It's one of the pleasures of the profession that you are always in doubt" (FS 255). Yet this certainty of doubt is like the narrator's certainty of dissatisfaction in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne": it reabsorbs him in a world of alienating mastery. And it is in terms of mastery that Becker evaluates his career, pointing out, "The point of my career is perhaps how little I've achieved" (FS 255).

In "The Sea of Hesitation" Barthelme continues his critique of progress by examining the way abstract knowledge is applied. His model is behavioral psychology. The narrator of the story is a former psychologist who now works

in the "Human Effort Administration." As a psychologist the narrator "thought behavior could be changed" (ON 95), and, as a scientist, it was his job to determine how.

However, the narrator encounters a crisis concerning the directions to which change can lead and so comes to admit, "I began to wonder if behavior should be changed. That there was "behavior" at all seemed to me a small miracle" (ON 96). Thus, the narrator joins the Human Effort Administration in order to encourage effort, not direction, to encourage action by "insofar as possible, [letting] people do what they want to do" (ON 96).

Of course, the narrator subsequently encounters problems by letting people act without guidance. For example, he receives epistles of hatred from an ex-girlfriend who seems to focus her attention on reasons why he is despicable. He consorts with two women who are consumed with restoring versions of history. One wants to reconfigure the Civil War so that it can redeem Robert E. Lee from his biggest fault, which she characterizes as "losing." The other hopes to augment Balzac's reputation by translating his works from the perspective of one who was "in an earlier existence . . . one of Balzac's mistresses" (ON 101). The problem with letting these women do what they want is that they are "hung up on the past" (ON 101) to such an extent that it determines their present. Without

guidance, they are determined to live their lives as women through an obsession with the texts of men.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the problem with letting people do what they want to do is that what they want may well be nothing but an ideological function of what has been wanted of them. Ironically, the narrator's own "enlightened" perspective encourages such a perpetuation of mythic longings. In terms of the phallic economy, then, the narrator's desire to let people do what they want makes him passive and thus feminine. This tendency is depicted in the story when he explains that while in the sensory deprivation tank his one desire was to let the Senior Investigator "do what he wanted" (ON 103). Science is depicted as having the authority to violate someone's rights (significantly, a someone deprived sensorily). In effect, letting someone act as he or she wants might not be letting them act at all. Actions seemed to be overdetermined by history, a notion in which science, even an enlightened one, is complicit.

Taken together, history and science constitute a great deal of what passes for knowledge in a culture. Barthelme suggests that western culture needs to reconfigure them by speaking about what it does not know. For example, the narrator comments that "Wittgenstein was wrong when he said that about that which we do not know, we should not speak. He closed by fiat a great amusement park, there. Nothing gives me more pleasure than speaking about that which I do

not know. I am not sure whether my ideas about various matters are correct or incorrect, but speak about them I must" (ON 100). The narrator can absorb more information by going beyond ideas of science and mastery than by adhering to them. He describes his life not as one of "willlessness" but as one enabling him to "pursue Possibility" and "that's something" (ON 103).

In Barthelme's view, for possibility to be something, it must replace fact. Thus, the narrator suggests that "[t]ruth is greatly overrated, volition where it exists must be protected, wanting itself can be obliterated, some people have forgotten how to want" (ON 105). Here, Barthelme suggests that action must not be motivated according to the measure of facts. Possibility needs to be desire apart from truth. Of course, what "The Sea of Hesitation" also depicts is a narrator never willing to act on those possibilities. He remains unsure about how to act on fragmentary desires within a world of overdetermined histories.

The stories described above depict patriarchal culture as the result of fragmented, overdetermined histories. This vision of culture is the premise for Barthelme's final novel, The King, which describes the Arthurian court governing Britain during World War II. Basically, The King demonstrates how possibility is structured out of western culture when oppressive ideas get reconfigured as progress. For example, the members of the medieval court govern a

contemporary society, ostensibly by first having had to come to grips with the extensive formality of their medieval desires. Yet these desires show that the two seemingly incompatible cultural spheres of medieval and contemporary Britain (Barthelme's liberties include the contemporization of World War II Britain) complement one another. For example Guinevere's infidelity, once paradigmatic of romantic yearning, is easily translated into modern anomie. Barthelme surprises his audience by easily conflating a modern consumerist culture with a medieval Arthurian one.

Yet a concern for propriety remains pervasive throughout The King. There is a proper way to do everything in the novel. Knightly protocol is followed to the letter in the battles on the field, and it serves as a metaphor for the protocol one must observe on any occasion. Launcelot, for example, espouses the proper way to slay a dragon, and Arthur recommends that people accept their station with "a good grace" (TK 11). Even these proprieties that seem to refer to medieval deeds and class relations, apply equally well to more contemporary difficulties. For example, Launcelot and the Black Knight ponder over due process before cutting down the Hanged Man, and Arthur adjusts tax burdens in response to a strike at the locomotive yards.

Propriety suggests the importance of form over action, and form, ultimately, is what is important for a patriarchy to perpetuate. For example, despite Guinevere's bawdiness

and willingness to discuss it, Lyonesse tells her "a queen is incapable of crudity" (TK 89). This is so because, like the genius of Barthelme's "The Genius," her importance is largely symbolic. Guinevere's crudity can always be translated into mythic terms that can elevate it to romance or tragedy. These designations, however, are not static, as Lyonesse observes when she explains queenship:

Outwardly . . . a queen is more or less marble. That is what the cheering crowds assume. They are glad to have us but at the same time think of us as pure symbol. We are that, none better at it, but we also have an inner life, concealed from the crowd. In that inner life, we create new myth--myth that will not circulate for maybe four or five hundred years but which is yet profound and pregnant. (TK 89-90)

Lyonesse's image of pregnant myth alludes to Barthelme's concern about the adaptability of myth, especially its ability to extend itself to historical change as a part of universal mythic framework. Thus, in a particularly topical example, Guinevere's tabloid behavior is still regal because the station of a queen precedes her actions.

The adaptability of myth causes Guinevere to find Launcelot's need to prove himself through crusades to be redundant. Launcelot, however, has internalized his station. In a sense, he has lost himself to the myth he has become. In this way, Launcelot has become an institution. For example, his primary selfish concern in the novel is to ensure the proper form for his obituary, and he may already be more alive circulating in discourse than alive in flesh.

The way he lives suggests as much. Even in his dalliance with Guinevere he concerns himself with form: he deliberates over how much he ought to adore her, ponders the appropriate time to send her flowers, and engages in meditation and self-flagellation to purify as much as possible their involvement. From his perspective, his obsession with form eliminates any illicitness in the affair, heightening it to tragedy. Yet Launcelot so excels in this atmosphere of tragedy that even the tragic takes on routine dimensions for him as he discusses his deeds throughout the novel. In this way, Barthelme suggests that part of the pervasiveness and the violence of mythic longings is that they are bound to seem routine. Thus, Launcelot never really has to modernize his mythic desires.

Even more than Launcelot, Arthur is bound by form. He shares Launcelot's concern with obituaries and, according to Sir Kay, his existence extends from medieval to contemporary times precisely because he is "famously modest and prudent . . . as well as steadfast" (King 11). Thus, Arthur is also a myth that by its endurance has become routine. He survives because of it. For example, when Mr. Churchill unofficially calls the King an anachronism and causes an unofficial clamor, Arthur simply remarks that there is nothing official to respond to and goes about his business. His business is always official, always formal. He tells Sir Kay that he has always modeled his political behavior so as to avoid "a



violation of the social contract" (TK 12). As Guinevere remarks, Arthur "always does the right thing" (TK 155).

Yet Arthur's existence becomes a formal trap. Launcelot responds to Guinevere's observation that he has aged by saying, "Arthur is eternal. You might as well say of a stone that a stone has aged" (TK 104). Guinevere acknowledges this "stoniness" in Arthur. It is part of his problem. He cannot age because he does not live beyond his formal appearance. Arthur tells a reporter that the business of a King is "abstracting and essentializing" (TK 85). If one takes the essential of an abstract, one gets "pure form." That is what Arthur's life has become. His every move is bound by a contract. The novel literalizes this idea by its repeated references to how Merlin's prophecy is being fulfilled by Arthur, who points out that his future is "overdetermined" because of it. He is, in effect, used by history.

Barthelme suggests that since mythic forms have become routine and institutionalized, we are all used by history. This paradox is crystallized in the text when one chapter is devoted to a description of Guinevere bathing. The narrative affects a medieval tone to describe how Guinevere's beauty is such that it is sinful to behold. Of course, it goes on at length to behold it. However, because its form is "proper," the propriety of modesty is emphasized more than the violation of voyeurism, at least ostensibly.

Barthelme suggests that the form contains its own violation, once again underscoring the key to the prevalence of mythic order in patriarchal culture.

Hence, any voice in that culture can disguise violence behind form. For example, Walter the Penniless, the "opposite" of the wealthy and powerful King Arthur, preaches, "No matter how they mouth 'Sweet Jesu' and 'Jesu mercy' and 'Jesu deliver me' and 'Jesu be your speed' and such like, it is their own worship and pelf they cultivate" (TK 111). His oratory suggests that he does the same. For instance, he commits a formal contradiction by saying that he never desires to appear wiser than others as he lectures to them. Like Arthur, he abstracts and essentializes. His effect, then, is kingly. It is appropriate that the knights in his audience appreciate his speech and act upon it with the propriety it deserves: they "go out and slice some fellow's liver off" (TK 111), perpetuating the violence that is depicted as history in the novel.

This history becomes a "natural" order, giving a violent twist to the abstraction that history is fiction. As Arthur points out, history, seen as a body of knowledge, is overdetermined as well. Launcelot captures its mythic dimensions best when he explains to Guinevere the concept of "shouldness":

Shouldness is perhaps self-explanatory, but I have never seen it adequately dealt with, either in print or in the lecture hall. When the huntress got me in the bum with an arrow, it was an offense

to shouldness. It should not have gone that way . . . It's in the realm of those things which should not happen--a category which holds much philosophical interest, as anyone who has ever looked into anomaletics will recognize . . . Our love is, similarly, an affront to shouldness--first to conventional morality and then to unconventional morality in that it's so damned difficult to pursue, with journalists coming out of the woodwork and Arthur being impossibly noble about the whole thing and all that. The should of love is that something is possible at least. (TK 106-107)

The "should not happen" happens in mythic history, to a mythic character. That it is easily absorbed into the framework of that history is evident in that it quickly earns a philosophical category. The "should not" is also like mythic history in that it bounds a paradox--it affronts both morality and immorality. It is no wonder then that Arthur can be noble about it: it fits into his form of history. Launcelot's and Guinevere's love is in his eyes at once a should and a shouldn't. As such, it is a paradigm of mythic form. Barthelme's irony is clear since that same love is a paradigm of "tragic" form in literature. In Barthelme's view, the tragedy might be more in that it remains a paradigm.

However, Barthelme does not simply throw his hands up in despair in the face of a seemingly monologic mythic framework. In his conflation of the search for the Holy Grail with the discovery of the atomic bomb, he provides a suggestion on how to "blow apart" the paradigm he describes.<sup>52</sup>

Late in the novel, Arthur catches a fish, thereby becoming the redemptive Fisher King of Eliot's poem. In order for him to fulfill his redemptive role, Arthur decides that he will not deploy the atomic bomb, which would, of course, wreck havoc upon the land. However, Arthur acknowledges that he is only deferring the eventual introduction of nuclear technology into the history of war. Thus, by not using the bomb Arthur also re-enacts Barthelme's view of cultural succession, bringing history and fiction together, old quests and new.

However, in a sense, Arthur does use the bomb. By accepting a different role in mythic history, that of the Fisher King, he blows apart the sanctity of historical representations of myth. Barthelme offers the hope that conflating mythic scripts can lead to a change in "history." Thus, Arthur changes history, a change made literal in the text when he survives his own death at Mordred's hands by tampering with Merlin's prophecy. Ultimately, Arthur's actions are redemptive only because they break with the violent successions of mythic narrative. Arthur acts as heir neither to his own myth nor that of the Fisher King. The metaphorical explosion he creates by tampering with history has the advantage of being neither as literally violent as the atomic bomb nor figuratively as violent as the historical texts of patriarchy. Thus, Barthelme avoids the problem of imaginistically extending the violence of

patriarchy in his attempts to adjust it, a problem the ending of The Dead Father could not avoid.

Thus, the challenges Barthelme mounts against the sanctioned historical authorities in The King are "unofficial."<sup>53</sup> As suggested in "January," they "replace fact," and the world of facts, with a world of variegated possibilities. These possibilities can be considered by the range of characters in the novel, good or bad, underscoring Barthelme's rejection of the mythic framework in which these designations rest. For example, Mordred, when unofficially named regent, hopes for an antidote to kingliness; not coincidentally, at the same time that he considers this antidote, the narrative considers an extenuation of his conduct.

However, true to his intention of dissolving moral wholes, Barthelme remains ambiguous in his resolution to The King. On one hand, he wants to hold nothing sacred. Thus, the pious Black Knight Roger de Ibadan becomes a highwayman. His fiancé Clarice announces their joint career by saying, "To work, heigh-ho" (TK 144), aping the fairy-tale work song that Barthelme first used to undermine notions of purity in Snow White.

On the other hand, Barthelme acknowledges that the most revered part of the Arthurian myth remains. The best known characters--Launcelot, Guinevere and Arthur--do not vanish. Launcelot--described as "encumbered" by his legendary

proportions--is last seen dreaming about the very events that begin the novel. Guinevere, described as "forever a paradigm of the divided heart" (TK 143), is stereotypically encumbered as well. She retires with Arthur to the mountains where he will conduct German resistance "in a way" (TK 156).

In The King, Barthelme concedes that while we may never eradicate mythic traditions, we might be able to fragment them in a way that alters how authority is authorized. This painstaking challenge to patriarchal authority is the only "progress" he is willing to stand behind. Barthelme develops this progress most fully through the relationship of Roger and Clarice, which represents the ethos that Barthelme ultimately privileges in the novel. In two important ways Clarice and Roger break from mythic scripts. First, Clarice finds success as a woman on the margins of power, so much success, in fact, that she refuses the chance to become a queen and fulfill the role of a successful woman as designated in myth. Second, Roger, with broad power after helping to assure Arthur's victory over Mordred, yet still (quite literally) a Black Knight, follows her to those margins. In this way, he relocates his patriarchal credibility less oppressively.

In effect, Barthelme suggests a "masculine" version of what Irigaray calls "mimicry," in which the male turns a form of patriarchal affirmation into a subordination (i.e.

Roger takes the boons of his knighthood and crosses them over into the "elsewhere" of thievery), while the female articulates herself by turning a form of patriarchal subordination into an affirmation (i.e. Clarice takes the "elsewhere" of thievery and turns it into the patriarchal boon of economic success).<sup>54</sup> Barthelme advocates such a resubmission to the phallogocentric mythic framework only as it leads to the transgressive: as it is "unofficial," as it is contrary to the form of enlightened liberal progress, as it seeks the outsides of culture even as it imitates the forms and speaks the words of patriarchal culture's privileged. In this way, there is even a positive reading of how Arthur conducts resistance "in a way" from his final retreat to the mountains--it is Guinevere who leads him there. The Avalon in which he comes to reside is then a modern day fragment broken off from the Edenic Avalon into which he has historically been projected. From this elsewhere of patriarchal myth, even Arthur may conduct subversion without re-indoctrination.

### Notes

1. Joyce Carol Oates, "Whose Side Are You On," The New York Times Book Review, 4 June 1972, 63. Hereafter cited in the text as Oates.
2. John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 80. Hereafter cited in the text as OMF.
3. Arlen J. Hansen, "The Celebration of Solipsism: A New Trend in American Fiction," Modern Fiction Studies 19, 1, (1973).
4. The interview with Jerome Klinkowitz appears in The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 52.
5. Jerome Klinkowitz, "Literary Disruptions: Or, What's Become of American Fiction" in Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), 171. Hereafter cited in the text as LD.
6. Alan Wilde, "Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts on Postmodern Irony" Boundary 2 5, 1 (1976): 49. Hereafter cited in the text as BUK.
7. Ronald Sukenick, "The New Tradition in Fiction" in Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Urbana: The Swallow Press, 1975), 43-44. Hereafter cited in the text as NT.
8. Thomas M. Leitch, "Donald Barthelme and the End of the Road" Modern Fiction Studies 26, 1 (1982): 140.
9. Raymond Federman, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in form of an Introduction" in Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow (Urbana: The Swallow Press, 1975), 7. Hereafter cited in the text as SF.
10. Donald Barthelme, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 169. Hereafter cited in the text as UN. Further references to Barthelme's work will be given in the text and are to the following editions (the abbreviations used are indicated): DC: Come Back, Dr. Caligari (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964); SW: Snow White (New York: Atheneum, 1972); CL: City Life (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970); DF: The Dead Father (New York: Penguin Books, 1975); SS: Sixty Stories



(New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981); ON: Overnight to Many Distant Cities (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983); FS: Forty Stories (New York: Penguin Books, 1987); TK: The King (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

11. Raymond Olderman, Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). Hereafter cited in the text as BW.

12. James Rother, "Parafiction: The Adjacent Universe of Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon and Nabokov" Boundary 2 5, 1 (1976): 26.

13. R. E. Johnson, "'Bees Barking in the Night': The End and the Beginning of Donald Barthelme's Narrative" Boundary 2 5, 1 (1976): 88-89.

14. John Leland, "Remarks Remarked: What Curios of Signs!" Boundary 2, 5, 3 (1977): 795. Hereafter cited in the text as RR.

15. Leland sees Barthelme's Snow White as illustrative of what Levi-Strauss calls the serialization of myth. He writes:

For Levi-Strauss the novel was born from the attenuation of myth; and as a consequence, the novel is an ever-receding pursuit of its paradigmatic structure. While this may or may not be true, Levi-Strauss' description of the birth and the death of the novel, paralleling a transformation from cyclical to serial structure, makes a good deal of sense in reference to Barthelme's work. As Snow White moves from the pages of Grimm to New York to write poetry and screw in the shower with her seven male roommates, so too does the mythic subject matter of the original tale become dissipated . . . Alienated from the mythic paradigm from which she springs, Snow White must exist instead within structures of reduplication. And in the end, this succession of episodes, this fragmented reduplication, takes the place--inadequately--of the closed structure of myth. Barthelme's Snow White becomes a form of a form, absorbing the aspirations of the original structure yet surviving only as it endlessly repeats without resolution. (RR 804)

16. If taken prescriptively, and, here as elsewhere, Barthelme's parodic style resists the full strength the term "prescription" implies, Barthelme's pragmatic advice shares ground with at least two contemporary progressive thinkers with sizable conservative streaks. See, for example,

William H. Gass who in Fiction and the Figures of Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), argues that the artist "must present us with a world that is philosophically adequate" (8), and Christopher Lasch, who in The Culture of Narcissism (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), advocates "communities of competence" to shape modern capitalism and scientific knowledge into a "decent society" (235).

17. The position I am attributing to Barthelme is similar to that of certain Marxist critiques of discourse and power. For example, John Frow notes Tzvetan Todorov's assertion in Les Genres du discours (Collection Poétique Paris: Seuil, 1978) that "any verbal property whatsoever which is optional at the level of the language system can be made obligatory in discourse; the choice that a society makes between all the possible codifications of discourse determines its system of genres" (23). Frow, himself, goes on to observe that "discourse . . . is not the random product of free subject operating 'outside' or 'above' the language system . . . It is the production of a unified cluster of semantic, structural, and contextual meanings in accordance with generic norms" (Marxism and Literary History Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 69).

18. Increasingly in his later work, Barthelme demonstrates a tendency to disrupt the progressive, linear path of his text through the emergence of a non-linear, counterforce narrative. For example, In Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), Jerome Klinkowitz notes an emerging feminism in female protagonists of The Dead Father, Emma and Julie, specifically located in the way their speech is freed from linear necessity and so allows "other structural combinations to take form," (95) which he believes is "as much a counterforce to Dead Fatherhood as anything" (93). This counterforce increases in The King, in which not only are the female protagonists--Guinevere, Lyonesse, and Clarice--the more fully dimensional characters in the novel, they are also the characters most likely to challenge what otherwise seems the inexorable advance of restrictive patriarchal ordering. Clarisse, for example, a highwayman by trade, responds to The Black Knight's, Roger de Ibadan's, characterization of Guinevere as "forever a paradigm of the divided heart" by observing, "But managing to have a suspiciously good time along the way" (TK 143).

19. Larry McCaffery, The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and William H. Gass (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 14.

20. Jack Hicks, In the Singer's Temple: Prose Fictions of Barthelme, Gaines, Brautigan, Piercy, Kesey, and Kosinski

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 23. Hereafter cited in the text as ST.

21. Seeing John Barth as a "parafictionist" par excellence among a group that includes Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Vladimir Nabokov, James Rother turns one of his own essay titles against him and characterizes Barth as "the exhausted exhauster of the literature of exhaustion" (PF 23). Rother's specious claim is buttressed, however, by the insistence on the "new" in fiction argued for in works such as William Gass's Fiction and the Figures of Life, Raymond Federman's Surfiction and Larry McCaffery's The Metafictional Muse to name but a few. In the latter, for example, McCaffery suggests postmodern writers challenge the tradition of "a naively dogmatic epistemology from the outset" and believe "concepts such as character and plot [have] to be reworked by writers who [have] grown skeptical about causal relationships, beginnings, middle, and ends (or progression in the old sense)" (MM 13), leaving little comfortable area for literary realists.

22. Jerome Klinkowitz, in his preface to Literary Disruptions (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) characterizes postmodern humor as "painful but often hilarious self-conscious artistry" (x), a sentiment shared by McCaffery who finds a "fundamental sense of playfulness" in works that are "formally outrageous and darkly humorous" (MM 14). Both authors find such an attitude the appropriate stance to convey epistemological skepticism.

23. For a helpful overview on the relationship between humor and the fragmentary see the introductory chapter of Paul E. McGhee's Humor: Its Origin and Development (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1979). McGhee considers the vocabulary of humor and points out that terms frequently used to characterize it--words like "absurd," "incongruous," and "ridiculous," for example,--all suggest that the experience of humor is that of an event broken off from the normal pattern of daily occurrence. McGhee also notes that the phylogeny of humor consists of attempts to isolate it in the whole of human experience and then reconcile it to that postulated whole. Additionally, in his introduction to American Humor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Arthur Power Dudden notes American humor's evolution toward a state of alienation and self-detachment. Of course, these are the same terms that have consistently been applied to Barthelme's works in general.

24. Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with Donald Barthelme" in Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists, eds. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 52.  
Hereafter cited in the text as ACH.

25. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, for example, describes a similar totalizing perspective reinscribed through the "liberalism" of western fiction up through the Modernist novel. In The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Non-fiction Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976, hereafter cited in the text as MP), he compares what he calls the interpretive "supramodernist" novel to the totalizing modernist novel with its "comprehensive private world view" (3) and determines that the value of the supramodernist novel lies in its ability to uncover how "reality is no longer totalizable into a 'yes' or 'no'" (227).

26. In The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), Michel Foucault describes an epistemological mutation in the conception of history that results in "displacements and transformations" of historical structures (such as political, economic, and social institutions). In Foucault's words, this mutation directs analysis "away from the search for silent beginnings, and the never-ending tracing-back to the original precursors, towards the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects" (4). If Foucault is correct, such a shift spells trouble for the narrative of realism, which will find its ability to account for daily experience challenged by the seeming discontinuity of contemporary technological society. Thus, Barthelme depicts a realism cut off from its explanatory assurances as it gropes for its precursor narratives. In a similar manner, he re-renders the passing down of symbolic narratives in "The Glass Mountain" by shattering the symbol, demonstrating that the symbol can only be viable if it is itself various.

27. Zavarzadeh notes a similar hierarchal shift in values in the latter half of the twentieth century, corresponding to the growing uncertainty about the nature of experience. He believes that this shift has resulted in entropy replacing order as the controlling metaphor of culture (MP 16-17). While Zavarzadeh argues that the result of hierarchal shifts has been that contemporary experience is indeterminable according to historical frames of reference, my contention is that such shifts have been and are the bastions of patriarchal history, the very reason that new movements in literature or periods in art, philosophy, music, etc. inevitably invite comparison to their predecessors.

28. Here, Barthelme's presentation of the medical logic is flawed: the greater the prematurity, the smaller the infant, and thus the less "generous" the episiotomy. His

deliberate reversal of that logic underscores the violence "inadvertently" done to women in a world modeled according to the dictates of scientific progress.

29. The "comprehensive study" describe here is a recurrent image in Barthelme's early fiction. For example, Bill, the leader of the seven men in Snow White, refers to "a multifaceted program" (SW 52) he had hoped would consolidate his reputation as a leader, and the narrator of "Paraguay" views a government plan that is "a way of allowing a very wide range of tendencies to interact" (CL 27). In The Mythopoeic Reality, Zavarzadeh notes that such postulated fictional metasystems reflect western culture's attempt at what he calls the "synergetics of the scientific-technological order," which he characterizes as a futile attempt to bring technological advances into accord with the "facts of everyday life" through processes, ideas and procedures. Zavarzadeh believes that while similar attempts have been seen as historically valuable for the maintenance of social order, the "open ended and indeterminable system" of contemporary technology "defies all historical and totalizing frames of reference" (MP 18-19).

30. Herself a product of what Luce Irigaray in This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) calls "the economy of the Same" (TS 74), Florence is just as able as any male to fulfill the patriarchal figurehead function, as long as that function continues to promote both the desire for and the impossibility of fulfillment.

31. Snow White, then, can be seen as symbolic of what Roland Barthes calls in S/Z (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974) a "broken text" (14). She is a sketch inviting commentary, but that commentary can never complete the sketch. Barthes describes what the commentary can do: "The work of the commentary, once it is separated from any ideology of totality, consists precisely in manhandling the text, interrupting it. What is thereby denied is not the quality of the text (here incompatible) but its naturalness." (15) Snow White can never be natural once manhandled; thus, neither can she be naturally symbolic of femininity. Barthes's use of the verb "manhandling" comments upon the impossibility of a natural symbol, and complements Barthelme's concern with systemic patriarchy oppression.

32. Robert A. Morace, "Donald Barthelme's Snow White: The Novel, the Critics, and the Culture" Critique 26, 1 (1984): 4.

33. The "everything-is-correctible" approach to the world is critiqued specifically by Martin Heidegger in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
34. Malcolm Bradbury, "The Open Form: The Novel and Reality," in Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 19.
35. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 32.
36. The adjustments Barthelme's narrator makes to his allegedly "quotidienne" experiences are common to the time in which the story is set. For example, Benjamin DeMott, as early as 1962, in an article entitled "Looking for Intelligence in Washington" (in Hells and Benefits New York: Basic Books, 1962) notes that  
 no pollster's survey is required to confirm that people everywhere, at all levels of life, have made "satisfactory adjustments," have found ways of controlling the desperate awareness of personal helplessness (by renaming it "maturity" "disinterestedness," or "sophistication"), have learned to half-live with the most intolerable and deeply lodged suspicion of the times: namely, that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere. (95-96, DeMott's italics)
37. In On Longing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), Susan Stewart describes the process through which longing can become enlightenment in her description of the "future-past":  
 [T]he location of desire, or, more particularly, the direction of force in the desiring narrative, is always a future-past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus eschaton, the point where narrative begins/ends, both engendering and transcending the relation between materiality and meaning. Yet the particular content of this desire is subject to historical formation. (x)  
 Stewart goes on to describe how narratives can "generate and engender a significant other" (xi). In the case of the narrator of "The Party," this other is that self who knows his boundaries, at the same time the narrator believes that he can no longer fully know his boundaries.

38. Jerome Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 88. Hereafter cited in the text as DBAE.
39. Stanley Trachtenberg, Understanding Donald Barthelme (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 188-189.
40. Lois Gordon, Donald Barthelme (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 162. Hereafter cited in the text as Gordon.
41. See Luce Irigaray's chapters "This Sex Which Is Not One" and "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" in This Sex Which Is Not One (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
42. The legacy of Lilith is one of two-fold textual exclusion: first, herself from the Garden of Eden; second, her story from the books of the Bible. In this way it points to the problem women have historically faced trying to secure a textual legacy of their own. For example, in Diving Deep and Surfacing (Boston: Beacon Books) Carol Christ observes, "The simple act of telling a woman's story from a woman's point of view is a revolutionary act. It has never been done before" (7). In his novel Lilith (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), George MacDonald provides a characterization of Lilith that inadvertently helps to explain why, "Of creating, she knows no more than the crystal that takes its allotted shape, or the worm that makes two worms when it is cloven asunder" (322-323).
43. Gregory L. Lucente, The Narrative of Realism and Myth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 31. Hereafter cited in the text as NR.
44. Teresa L. Ebert, "Postmodern Politics, Patriarchy, and Donald Barthelme" Review of Contemporary Fiction 11, 2 (1991): 75-76. Hereafter cited in the text as PP.
45. For example, see Teresa Ebert's discussion of the complex way Barthelme demystifies the obviousness of patriarchal thought in "Postmodern Politics, Patriarchy and Donald Barthelme" (Review of Contemporary Fiction 11, 2 (1991): 75-82) and Jerome Klinkowitz's description of the "boomeranging" effect of The Dead Father throughout Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

46. Charles Molesworth, "The Nascimento Effect and Barthelme's The King" Review of Contemporary Fiction 11, 2 (1991): 104. Hereafter cited in the text as NE.
47. For a thorough treatment of the development of the rhetoric of myth and realism, see the first three chapters of Lucente's The Narrative of Myth and Realism.
48. Alan Wilde also observes that Barthelme is looking for a way to re-create value and meaning in a world whose previous models for them seem too dogmatically overcertain or self-consciously uncertain. Wilde sees Barthelme as aggressively negotiating these extremes. In Middle Grounds: Studies in Contemporary American Fiction (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), Wilde argues that through the paradoxes he observes Barthelme can find impetus for moral fiction: "Unlike the paradoxes that translate modernist irresolution into aesthetic stasis, Barthelme's find energy in contradiction and in so doing realize the potential of midfiction" (37).
49. Taken together, these moments mimic the growth of genius, which as Christine Battersby notes, has evolved to the point that it can precede itself. In Gender and Genius (London: The Women's Press, 1989, hereafter cited in the text GG) she argues that for the male, historically, "the genius was his potential virility, energy or life-giving force" (53).
50. Christine Battersby notes the "special responsibilities" the genius has for "forming human beings, and for maintaining quality controls over the process of their production" (GG 62).
51. Here, Barthelme dramatizes a condition frequently treated in feminist discourse. For example, Irigaray addresses the textuality of femininity in This Sex Which Is Not One when she notes that a woman's idea about herself has historically been elaborated in a masculine logic. A similar concern lies behind Alice A. Jardine's use of the term "gynesis" and the related concern with écriture féminine found in the writings of the Tel Quel group.
52. In Alternate Worlds: A Study of Postmodern Anti-Realist American Fiction (New York: New York University Press, 1989), John Kuehl devotes one section to a discussion of the "absurd quest" motif abundant in recent contemporary fiction. Kuehl suggests these quests are abortive constructs denying the assumption of any coherence lying behind modern day chaos. In his treatment of the absurd quest in The King, Barthelme diverges from the strategy behind the absurd quests of John Barth's Giles Goat Boy or



Gilbert Sorrentino's Blue Pastoral, for example. While these works parody the patterns of myth and so hope these patterns decay in the parody, Barthelme worries that the parodic form may be itself complicit in the extension of the myth. Thus, his construct (the atomic bomb) is far too real to abort without being accounted for.

53. For his protagonists, the majority of whom are male, Barthelme advocates that they attempt to marginalized their positions of power in order to reduce the oppression of those positions. In a sense, Barthelme hopes to end where Kathy Acker finds herself beginning. In other words, he reverses the narrative path of Acker, who finds herself exploring the ways her narrators can come into positions of legitimate power.

54. See Irigaray's discussion of mimicry in the chapter "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" in This Sex Which Is Not One.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### "IT WAS THAT COMPLEX": DON DELILLO AND POLAR EXTREMES

The pure products of America go crazy  
--William Carlos Williams

#### Polar Extremes

One pervasive critical perception of Don DeLillo is that he is an analytical, even scientific, author. His most thorough critic, Thomas LeClair, characterizes DeLillo's corpus as "influenced by and parallel[ing] the ideas of 'systems theory,'" a contemporary scientific paradigm that concentrates on the reciprocal--looping--communications of ecological systems. In Readings from the New Book of Nature, Robert Nadeau argues that

DeLillo apparently feels . . . that by detaching ourselves from the word as Logos, and placing greater emphasis upon the function of the word as concrete referent, we would be better able to construct an alternative reality more consistent with the metaphysics implied in the new physics.<sup>2</sup>

And Christian K. Messenger, writing about End Zone, observes that DeLillo "extends the images of language and football as systems to [a] third interlocking symbol, that of nuclear war, which also possesses atoms seeking collision and which can be launched through the jargon of atomic destruction."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, DeLillo's own description of Ratner's Star as a

novel of "naked structure . . . a piece of mathematics, in short,"<sup>4</sup> makes it difficult to argue against a scientific approach as the logical starting point toward understanding his work. In addition, the sheer abundance of technological references throughout DeLillo's novels and his apparent over-arching inquiry into the nature and workings of complex systems, especially as they pertain to science and culture, demand that one account for rational systems as they influence his writing.

However, some of the same scientists and academicians who help shape what becomes institutionalized as "rational thought" concede that the pursuit of logical understanding should not be an all-encompassing one. Even as he concentrates on DeLillo's embrace of the new physics, Nadeau cites a "formidable" historian of science who suggests that

We shall have to get accustomed to the idea that we must not look upon science as a "body of knowledge," but rather as a system of hypotheses; that is to say, as a system of guesses or anticipations which in principle cannot be justified, but which work as long as they stand up to tests, and of which we are never justified in saying that we know that they are "true" or "more or less certain" or even "probable." (RNB 8)

It is within this web of uncertain science that all of DeLillo's characters find themselves entangled, and the more advanced they find the scientific system, the less likely they are to see the possibility of disentanglement. As Lindsay Keller points out in DeLillo's 1983 novel The Names, science has not lived up to its reputed promise to simplify the world:

"How big the world is. They keep telling us it's getting smaller all the time. But it's not, is it? Whatever we learn about makes it bigger. It's all a complication. It's one big tangled thing . . . Modern communications don't shrink the world, they make it bigger. They give us more, they connect more things . . . The world is so big and complicated we don't trust ourselves to figure out anything on our own. No wonder people read books that tell them how to run, walk and sit. We're trying to keep up with the world, the size of it, the complications."<sup>5</sup>

Keller's complaint that science has made the world so complex that we can become intimidated by activities as rudimentary as walking and sitting is not an isolated occurrence in DeLillo's corpus. In fact, Pammy Wynant works for a firm that manages grief in Players, and Babette Gladney, in White Noise, teaches courses in posture and eating. Thus, while critics such as LeClair and Nadeau celebrate the attempts DeLillo's characters make to keep pace with the new scientific world, they de-emphasize an equally strong tendency in DeLillo's novels for his characters to distance themselves from the increasing complexities of science, to find a haven away from its demands, a safe retreat, or, as Frank Volterra explains it in The Names, a place to "hide out for the rest of [one's] life" (TN 156).

As DeLillo explains in an interview describing the scenario of Mao II, his characters are trapped between "polar extremes."<sup>6</sup> In Mao II, he describes these extremes as those marking the distance between "the arch individualist and the mass mind" (DDD 76).

In one respect, these extremes can represent the difference between conceptions of the historical and contemporary self. The historical self is the individual as mover and shaper, recognized throughout western mythos as that larger than life self whose deeds shape civilizations. Its course shapes perceptions of mythic Greek heroes such as Odysseus as well as mythologized American heroes such as Abraham Lincoln. In this country, particularly, the hero as doer gives rise to a description of national identity-- "rugged individualism," an expression used to characterize the forging of the American cultural identity. This self-reliant construction of identity can be contrasted to that version of the contemporary self as a cog in a collective, a view increasingly common as an increasing abundance of information has, for example, made one's official name a number (or a series of numbers). The manifestations of this contingent identity can be seen in the guise of the anonymous scientist, the corporate identity, or the "they" commonly referred to behind forces of social and political power. For DeLillo, these extremes illustrate one version of historical succession and disquietingly depict his view of a dehumanizing "progress."

Yet, from another perspective, these extremes co-exist. DeLillo notes with dark political appropriateness how currently they represent the mind of the terrorist and the mind of the mass collective, two forces he favors as subject

matter (Players, Running Dog) and two forces American politics has historically brought together, as, for example, in the CIA's involvements in Cuba and Central America. In fact, as the last examples attest, these extremes are interdependent. Heroes and villains arise from the collective only to get reabsorbed into the TV medium. What emerges is a sense of history that moves in dynamic loops that defy and yet paradoxically enforce the linear model of progress,

One might think such a view is a particularly postmodern development. However, for DeLillo, it seems appropriate to any attempt to classify experience. Consider, for example, romanticism, one of DeLillo's major influences. A.D. Harvey maintains that "romanticism was an attempt to escape from the demands of the public sphere: an attempt to retreat into a private world where the individual was alone with his own individuality."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, M.H. Abrahms finds it an attempt "to overcome the sense of man's alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quality, and motion . . . to tie man back into his milieu."<sup>8</sup> Abrahms and Harvey seem to be creating their own polar extremes, while at the same time they are both describing positions commonly associated with romanticism. Abrahms takes the arguably Wordsworthian

notion that it is only through nature that individuals experience true community, Harvey the more Byronic stance that we are a community only to the extent that we should all be compelled to seek out our own individuality. Neither of these definitions can be found to be more or less true than the other without betraying a prejudice. However, the debate itself is not as compelling as the observation that the integrity of the term "romanticism" does not suffer because of it. Geoffrey Thurley, for example, observes in The Romantic Predicament,

No definition of Romanticism has yet been offered, indeed, which cannot, apparently, be discredited by a host of counter-examples: the characteristics usually thought of as specifically Romantic (subjectivity, nature-worship, distrust of rationalism, hunger for wholeness, pantheism) can all be found in much work that certainly is not Romantic, yet are often absent from much work that indisputably is.<sup>9</sup>

Thurley's observation suggests that even without a distinct referent, romanticism "is." Thus, one must accept the possibility that romantic history describes a history between co-dependent extremes. Yet, even while maintaining this view, Thurley sees his own perspective as the result of progress:

What we need is an approach which accepts the historical actuality of Romanticism and understands that to analyse Romantic art in its forms and intentions is to explain its historical situation and vice-versa . . . the errors [of previous definitions] stem from their attempts to deal with art in isolation from the general cultural and historical situation in which it is always grounded. (RP 4)

The "errors" Thurley finds suggest that he also sees romantic history as a repetitive movement between extremes of interpretation, moving toward progressive enlightenment.

DeLillo makes polar extremes out of the interplay between the desire for spiritual transcendence and the desire for technological mastery. By doing so he invites characterizations such as "romantic" or "scientific" in order to expose the interplay between them, and he examines the consequences such an interplay has for the formation of the modern subject.

DeLillo's characters interact in a world bounded only by extremes; between them DeLillo recognizes the disturbing complexities that inform identity. One of these is that linear paths do not reach linear destinations--as the old saying goes, one extreme leads to another--and so planning and ratiocination cannot be relied upon to attain self-knowledge. For example, in Americana David Bell becomes a recluse after trying to turn his life into a movie, while in Libra, Lee Oswald gets turned into the media star "Lee Harvey Oswald" after believing he has become a recluse. Another complication is that the extremes of public and private self do not help either character master or escape his existence. Thus, Bell has given his life over to the medium and Oswald is alone in his cell.

In other words,, DeLillo realizes that the structures he has condigned for the consideration of self are



themselves complicating factors in that consideration. His texts demonstrate that we are traduced by our systems even as we use them to provide order for our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us. The resultant ambiguity menaces DeLillo's characters at the same time that it provides them with moments of dark pleasure. DeLillo, likewise, seems at times to relish the opportunity, to borrow a phrase from Roland Barthes, to "allow the utterance of [his] text to proceed in contradiction."<sup>10</sup>

In DeLillo's first three novels, it is the specter of mass conformity, frequently characterized by him as mechanical or technological in nature, that evokes in his protagonists a desire to reassert self-identity. Through his narrators' experiences, DeLillo examines the implications of trying to assert the romantically transcendent self. David Bell, Gary Harkness, and Buckley Wunderlick flee from the summons of a too technological existence to seek out a more essential inner self. They see technological systems as threatening to kill off individuality by making individuals too much a part of everything around them. Their professions as television executive, football player, and rock superstar provide them with suitable vantage points within interdependent systems to make that determination.

So, they try to escape. However, they know themselves only through that complex technological mindset. Hence,

their versions of escape rely on using the culture's technology to escape from the culture. They try to remake themselves through science and technology by purifying that technology, or, in other words, they try to survive their systemic deaths by re-mastering the system.

This move leads them to the other polar extreme, that of the super-individual. This formulation of self is the logical extension of the individual who takes it upon himself to recreate culture.<sup>11</sup> In DeLillo's works, the end result of this extension of self is a type of deification--the master becomes the maker, and as such runs the risk of transcending the rules that were supposed to salvage his life.

In the end, this deification leads back to conformity. In DeLillo's novels, the deified figure makes himself vulnerable by granting access to his system to all who accept it. Since this new system is marked by an awareness of complex systems and technology and marketed within them, it becomes institutionalized or naturalized in interactive forms such as the media, international corporations and the multi-national government. These forms appear in DeLillo's novels as dark forces of conspiracy, those same forces he considers at length at work behind the Kennedy assassination in Libra. Individuality, then, taken to its "logical" extremes, ultimately becomes the greatest threat to the individual. Within this narrative, DeLillo

tries to salvage the individual by re-imaging the extremes that threaten it.

### The Echo Effect

Americana, DeLillo's first novel, is about journeys based on journeys. It uses as its base the path of American manifest destiny, which connected a series of dissociated settlements into a mass of united states, and it suggests that a similar path has been traced by American technology, which has connected dissociated individuals into a mass collective. Its protagonist, David Bell, disillusioned by technology's ability to infiltrate the sanctity of individual identity, attempts to pursue a manifest destiny of his own, which is paradoxically designed to restore via technology the individuality technology has threatened. His maxim is that only the culprit made pure can be the savior; and so David Bell, the media child, the network producer turned savior, will take his movie camera out west to re-record America's destiny and thus create a technologically pure religion. As moral support, he brings with him three travelling companions representative of less technological, more innocent, types of media: Sully, a sculptor of little renown; Brand, a frustrated writer and Vietnam vet; and Pike, an aging ex-repairman and would-be correspondent. Thus equipped, Bell hopes to re-create American destiny.

At one polar extreme Bell is threatened by a technology that can kill off individuality by networking individuals into everything around them. This extreme poses the threat of systemic death. At the other extreme awaits religion, which threatens individuality by sacrificing a token individual (the savior) and offering him up to all who accept the religion. At this extreme lies the threat of messianic death. In his first novel, then, as in Mao II, his most recent, DeLillo describes worlds bordered by hostile extremes between which his protagonists struggle in futile attempts to gain vantage points from which they can transcend the hostility.

Most of Americana is narrated in the past tense and dedicated to the account of Bell's journey west, as he recalls it from his current retreat on a remote African isle. However, there are several intrusions, leaps into Bell's present, where he reflects on the difference between the David Bell who went west and the one who now narrates. There are also retreats further into Bell's past that describe selected incidents from his childhood and provide an overview of his college years and his marriage. This layering of time periods suggests a depth to the narrative, a depth Bell needs in order to narrate. By giving accounts of himself at different times and places, Bell hopes to display various perspectives, hoping that as these perspectives accumulate throughout the novel the narrator

will be seen as growing with them. For example, Bell can be ironic about his younger self because he believes that he has learned so much in his later life. And yet from each new perspective, each new stage of alleged growth, Bell still finds himself trapped in situations threatening to his sense of individuality.

The ominous repetition described above is but one example in Americana of what Bell will come to call the "echoes" that make it difficult for him to direct himself between polar extremes. His efforts to do so inevitably result in the misdirection of his movements, which are always bouncing off the extremes, never settling into a stable center. ("Echoes" is the term used to describe this misdirection in Americana; there would be other terms in the novels that follow, such as the "action" described in Great Jones Street or the "complex" of Ratner's Star.) While surveying his life from his final island retreat, Bell considers that "one thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex" (AA 130).

The echo is complex in Americana because it is the term DeLillo uses to describe the unaccountable--whether what is unaccountable occurs on a structural, dramatic, literal, or (as in the quotation above) thematic level of the novel. Echoes indicate repetition radically altered, familiarity embracing excess, recurrence with reduction. They allude to

non-linear forces that challenge the linear logic of polar extremes conventionally associated with reason, science, and journeys of individual and national progress. These echoes are what would evolve into the "white noise" of White Noise and the baffling conception of history in Libra.

One gets an impression of movement in Americana, of a character's development, of progress, exemplified by the progress of Bell's journey. Ultimately, however, the play of echoes in the novel makes this suggestion of progress seem artificial, created primarily by Bell's need to see himself as progressing, as moving onward, lest he risk losing a vision of himself that he has spent a lifetime constructing. Therefore, the final irony in Americana does not derive from Bell's detached irony about himself in his remarkably self-conscious style of narration. If it were entirely successful, this would still reaffirm the growth he needs. The more compelling irony here is that this narrative, which is supposed to be comprehensive, is only an old story retold, an echo of itself. Thomas LeClair has astutely observed that "Americana is in itself an intricate fictional system, formulating and testing DeLillo's double binding aesthetic" (ITL 33), but he seems to overlook the fact that intricacy in Americana is only one end of what DeLillo describes as his polar extremes. This intricacy is inextricable from the simplicity of a single story retold, a story that echoes itself, destabilizing both borders in the

either-or logic of polar extremes. Americana launches DeLillo's continuing examination of either-or logic, an examination spurred on as much by fascination as by a desire for repudiation.<sup>12</sup>

In Americana the technological system under scrutiny is the media, and the threat of this system lies in its ability as a network to reach into the most intimate aspects of private life. As the son and grandson of advertising legends, David Bell serves as a testament to the extent of the media system's reach. Bell informs us that as a child he watched commercial reels instead of home movies or, perhaps more accurately, as home movies. This practice initiated Bell's movement toward the polar extreme of systemic death. Bell recalls that as he watched the commercial reels, he was prompted by his father to find "the threads and nuances of those commercials which had achieved high test ratings; to learn the relationship between kinds of commercials and their impact in the marketplace" (AA 84-85). In other words, he was encouraged to filter the development of his own self-image through an incessant barrage of commercial images and to see the resulting self-image as important primarily in the ways it measured itself against other possible selves developing in a vast and interactive "marketplace" of images. John Johnston points out that DeLillo's protagonists frequently "seem to have no other life--mental or otherwise--outside of the images that

define them and to which they react with private and ritualized re-orderings."<sup>13</sup> This observation is certainly true of David Bell. In fact, he has internalized his media self-image so thoroughly that at one point in the narrative he confides to us that he has come to believe that "all the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of [his] dreams" (AA 130). The term "dreams" to Bell apparently extends beyond his unconscious nighttime visions to include all of his desires, since throughout Americana he sees even his most intimate experiences in terms of media images. For example, Bell informs us that he hopes to free his sex life from the excess of media images he describes as "that montage of speed, guns, torture, rape, orgy, and consumer packaging which constitutes the vision of sex in America" (AA 33). Yet his own marriage suggests that his idea of freedom is merely the exchange of one set of media images for another. He confesses that he married his girlfriend Meredith because he became "stirred by the power of the image" (AA 31) after a romantic date with her, replete with soft lights, music and hand-holding. Bell even explains the breakdown of this marriage as a media failure, suggesting its demise came about from the fact "that Merry and [he] could not remember [their] lines" (AA 38).

All aspects of Bell's life follow this pattern of being filtered through a media gaze. His politics, for example, are informed by a conception of Vietnam as "the war [that]



was on television every night" (AA 5), and Robert Nadeau has aptly observed that Bell's conception of history depends upon his acceptance of the camera lens: "what the machine accepts is verifiably existent; all else is unborn or worse" (RNB 162).

Fittingly, it is Bell's professional life as a television executive that depends most markedly on his ability to see through the eyes of the media. Bell attributes his rapid career rise to his ability to control the media images imprinted within him. He visualizes his own mind as a "dark room with many doors" (AA 36); and he believes that by controlling what doors open and when they are opened, he can develop the resulting images in his favor, as if developing a movie print as he wishes to see it: "When I spoke at a meeting I could see the doors opening and closing in my mind and soon I arrived at the point where I could regulate the ebb and flow of light with absolute precision. I got a raise and then another" (AA 37). But as he realizes the extent to which the media link his "image" to the images of those around him, Bell's ability to control the media becomes increasingly questionable. He realizes that his mind does not occupy a privileged position in the "marketplace" of images he remembers from his childhood while watching his father's commercial reels. He is an actor in the marketplace, and a successful one--but he is also a pure product of America,

and one that the conditions of production threaten to drive crazy as he drives across the nation in his attempt to recover himself.

As Bell comes to grips with this increasingly complex image of the media "marketplace," his conception of it changes. Initially, he had accepted with the naiveté of a small child the media image his father offered him. However, as an adult, he speculates that the American dream of the good life, which was "innocent enough" up to the time of the "early astronauts" (AA 130), has since lost its innocence. The new American dream has grown complex enough, in Bell's image, to have "encompassed all those things which all people are said to want, materials and objects and the shadows they cast" (AA 130). This change in his conceptions emphasizes two distinct movements away from an innocent and romantic view of progress. First, romantically heroic "astronauts," persons both literally and figuratively above everyone else, have been replaced by "people," persons swarming everywhere among everyone else, who populate Bell's adult conception of the "marketplace." Second, the technology that made exceptional accomplishments by heroic astronauts possible has been replaced by an all-pervasive technology that connects everyone, including shadowy people and their possessions, in a system beyond their comprehension and control.

This technology is Bell's threatening adult conception of the media network into which he had been initiated as a child. Bell sees it and the marketplace within which it operates as inimical to individuality, which he characterizes as the ironic "presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one's awareness" (AA 130). As he worries about the complexity overwhelming the American dream he has internalized, it seems the irony that strikes Bell as "somehow very funny" is that he now perpetuates both that complexity and that dream. Professionally, he has become a network producer, and so it is his job to threaten everyone's individuality, including his own. This irony explains Bell's contention that he "no longer control[s] the doors" (AA 97) that shape the media image in his mind; it also accounts for his eventual decision to abandon his production career and travel west.

The journey Bell undertakes in Americana is a journey toward what he describes as "the mirror rim" of his awareness. It begins as a desire to take a vacation and, as he explains it to Sully, "do something more religious" (AA 10) than skiing or conventional sight-seeing. However, for Bell, the religious experience he hopes to find is the re-discovery of an individual integrity not obscured by the media network. Echoes are already audible. Bell's vacation plans betray the same romantic tendencies described in his earlier marriage; for just as his marriage proposal turned

into a romantic portrait, a work of art, so does his vacation turn into "an idea for a film [he] might make somewhere out there among the lost towns of America" (AA 125). Even his conception of the "lost towns" in the American west is an image taken directly from popular romance.

Since Bell has internalized the media image so thoroughly that even in his quest for individuality he cannot abandon it, he attempts at least to recast it in a setting that might be more conducive to innocence. Ideally, he hopes in his film to apply the technological complexities of the media network without compromising his individuality or humanity. In other words, he hopes to cleanse this network, the only apparatus he has ever known for constructing his self-image, of its dehumanizing qualities. He wants to turn the media image of his childhood around and make it offer the possibility of providing for the integral individual of the media age. Bell actually sees this conversion of the media image as a religious conversion. He models it after an image he retains of Burt Lancaster on the beach with Deborah Kerr in From Here to Eternity:

Burt was like a city in which we are all living. He was that big. Within the conflux of shadow and time, there was room for all of us and I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image. Burt in the moonlight was a crescendo of male perfection but no less human because of it. Burt lives! I carry that image to this day, and so, I believe, do millions of others, men and women, for their separate reasons. Burt in the moonlight. It was a

concept; it was the icon for a new religion. (AA 13)

As Bell envisions him, Burt is the media-network self, with whose molecules one can merge in a technological marketplace, and yet a self that maintains its humanity and individuality: "Burt lives!" The image is high romantic--Burt is a larger-than-life figure, cloaked in the mysteries of shadow and moonlight, a mysterious masculine ideal, yet at the same time intensely human. As opposed to the technotronics, post-industrial capitalism, and self-dilution that Bell blames on commercials and the media network, the prospect of merging with the movie image seems to offer him humanity, an ideal, and the sanctity of individuality within that ideal. Film romance becomes religion. Bell's subsequent film about "the lost towns of America" chronicles his attempt to form a religion around the Burt Lancaster ideal. But as this attempt becomes harder to control, Bell moves toward messianic death, the polar extreme of the rebirth he is seeking. The echoes build and resonate until they overwhelm everything, even their own articulation.

Bell's conception of religion redounds with romantic notions of innocence; and just as the media network within which he has been trained connects disparate peoples, Bell splices together disparate notions of romantic innocence in his religious schema. For example, as "a prelude to the sacred journey" (AA 124) that he is preparing to undertake, he undergoes "a ritual cleansing of the body" (AA 124) to

prepare himself for his own part in his quest. Bell's ritual suggests spiritual romance, a ritual of renunciation in order to attain illumination, such as M.H. Abrams might find necessary if a romantic is "to tie man back into his milieu" (ML 65), or that Morse Peckham contradictorily might prescribe to a romantic who wants to achieve "cultural transcendence."<sup>14</sup> The locale in which Bell hopes to construct his religion, described as "the lost towns of America" and, more generally, as "the west," suggests a view of innocence as that natural state existing before the demands of civilization, a view popularly attributed to Rousseau and very similar to what A.D. Harvey sees when he describes how romantics looked to the past to find "men who had faced issues similar to those of a later age, though perhaps in simpler times" (LH 162). Thus, Bell's religion depends on his ability to connect the various types of romantic traditions that he draws upon without having to come up with a consistent context--indeed, without having to confront the possibility that "simplicity" is simply a popular image of romanticism, a media image, without a basis in the contradictory art forms from which it is supposedly derived.

It is this ability to connect various traditions that originally enabled Bell to see Burt Lancaster as the icon for a religion. First he had to see Burt as a man threatened by too much civilization (the end result of which

is World War II), who salvages his humanity by finding love under an innocent, romantic veil. Then he extended Burt's situation by analogy to his own, seeing Burt as an appropriate model for reconstituting self because he could work in the dehumanizing network of war and still retain his humanity. Finally, Bell shifted gears and identified with Burt's humanity in a spiritual way, turning "natural" humanity into "spiritual" enlightenment.

Thus, the innocence Bell perceives is always a media innocence, since it is produced by re-applying networking principles. In a sense, Bell has simply tried to invert his production job, as he now attempts to use the same tools to produce harmonizing innocence instead of threatening complexity. He begins with the presumption that just as Burt can realize his humanity within a war, so he can realize his within the media, and still by being a producer, but a producer now turning out new, high-tech forms of romantic innocence. Americana, then, is the first of DeLillo's novels resembling what John A. McClure describes as "something of a metaromance, a quest narrative in which the aim is to find a viable romance form."<sup>15</sup>

Bell constantly juxtaposes religious and technical references, making a textual network of them in the same way he hopes to make a network of visual and auditory echoes that will become his religion. For example, at the outset of his trip, he tells us "what a mysterious and sacramental

journey" he believes he is undertaking, while the next paragraph, referring to himself and his compatriots, reads simply, "I taped many of our conversations" (AA 204). Bell hopes to tape mystery without demystifying it in the process. He hopes to be released from the dehumanizing media image of his past through his possession and romantic reapplication of media technology. If Marx sought to turn Hegel on his head, then Bell wants to turn him back over and put his head back in the sky. Consider the following passage:

That evening I got out my camera and went for a walk. It was a 16mm Canon Scoopic, modified to work as a sync rig with my tape recorder, a late model Nagra. The camera didn't have an interchangeable lens but it was light, easy to handle and went to work in a hurry. Originally all I had wanted to do on the trip west was shoot some simple film, the white clapboard faces of Mennonite farmers, the spare Kansans in their churchgoing clothes. But now my plans were a bit more ambitious, scaring me somewhat, at least in their unedited form. (AA 210)

As Bell thinks of the use to which he will put the camera, he develops in his mind a picture of network innocence, a picture fusing spiritual romantic innocence, at least to the extent that the farmers are Mennonites and the Kansans are churchgoing, with natural innocence, to the extent that these people are all residents of the lost towns of the American west. Bell's apparent trepidation stems from the scope of his new plan--creating a religion--and the fact that he has never had to "edit" this kind of media image before.



Still, Bell is very conscious of the fact that the camera, the instrument representative of technology, has become an indisputable part of his religious accoutrements. He believes that while he is recording he is engaging in an activity--creating a religion--that is, or will become, sacred, even though the technology still creates some obstructions:

Of course, it was the camera they were interested in, that postlinear conversation piece, and they gathered around me in stages, introducing themselves, asking questions, being exceedingly friendly, secretly preparing their outrage for the moment of my incivility. But I remained well-mannered throughout, a guest in sacred places.  
(AA 211)

The phrase "sacred places" works for Bell on two levels: first, on the level of his conscious awareness that he is attempting to create a religion, and second, on the level of his less-than-conscious reverence for settings suggestive of romantic innocence. In his narrative style we see that even though he thinks himself thoroughly ironic in his use of technology, it is still controlling him in a way that dooms his quest to a failure that fits perfectly with formulaic religious and media images.

Thus, while out west Bell casts about for a religion, or perhaps "recasts" would be a more accurate description, since he appropriates so many of his images from romantic forms. There is a precedent for this procedure from his own past. Before heading west, Bell remembers when he was a child and his mother would tell him "charming little fables

about Jesus," who "was a blond energetic lad who helped his mother around the house and occasionally performed a nifty miracle" (AA 137-138). In this quotation Bell's mother combines spiritual and popular romance by creating a Jesus who looks like Bell and placing him in a tidy little house that might as well be situated in one of Bell's lost places out west. Inspired by the image of Burt Lancaster, Bell might be doing the same thing as his mother: casting himself as a new networking Jesus sent out west to perform the nifty little miracle of establishing a new religion. But in casting himself, he is being recast. This is the first of the echoes Bell encounters that will make it difficult for him to people his film while retaining its purity. Indeed, it is an "echo" associated with Narcissus, and thus his reaction to it will keep his religion a shallow reflection of himself.

While Bell attempts to maintain his controlling irony by suggesting that the echoes operating in Americana are so complex as to defy comprehension, DeLillo shows his readers how specific echoes from Bell's past determinately affect his romantic attempts to reconfigure that past. His narrator's irony then appears as nothing more than his last romantic gesture, the one he cannot surrender. It is the desire for self-consciousness, for mastery that turns out to be nothing but an echo-effect, a desire cut off from natural

origins and yet unable to reach beyond the cultural world it must try to transcend.

Far from producing the singular force he saw in Burt Lancaster, Bell dilutes his presentation of himself. Within the film he is both a character played by an actor and a character playing himself; outside of the film he is writer, producer and director. As he thus links together his various roles, Bell diffuses their identities, making it difficult for anyone to relate to David Bell as he himself once related to the image of Burt Lancaster. Thus, as Bell echoes his mother's parable of Jesus, he is also echoing the network producer within himself, the self he was trying to flee in the first place because it seemed nothing but a diffuse network of relationships, not a coherent and "simple" image.

Just as Bell cannot escape his old media influences in his current self-depiction, neither can he in his procedures. As he shoots the story of his life, he selects specific scenes from it that he recreates; he fabricates entirely scenes from the lives of his sister and father; he chooses actors and selects locations and shots to sustain the effects he desires; in short, he follows through on the fatherly advice given to him when he was a child watching commercial reels--to know the "nuances" that make commercials work. When one considers that one of Bell's motivating forces is to create an image that millions of

people can carry home with them (as he did the image of Burt), what Bell does as director-producer of his film is to use his networking abilities to uncover what makes an "impact in the marketplace"--also as his father advised.

Ultimately, then, Bell's move to make his life into a romanticized Burt-Christ image becomes an absorption with his old self--the self constituted by the network media influence. This makes the film a monument to this paternally and culturally constructed self: spiritual purity as historical commodification. Earlier, Bell was able to merge with the Burt image because he was able to extend himself "until the molecules [of Burt on the screen] parted and [he] was spliced into the image" (AA 13). Now, if he is the icon, he is splitting his own image, merging with the image he wanted to flee, and so directing himself toward messianic death.

This direction continues as his film progresses and he becomes more and more affected by his involvement with his own past. The first symptom of this involvement is a series of phone calls he makes to people, some of whom he has not spoken to in years, whose histories he is appropriating for his production. Bell places these phone calls with the hope of gaining some information that can help him "develop" a more romantic picture of his past; but even as he tries to idealize this past, he cannot refrain from introducing remarks that rehash old quarrels, making these phone calls

more echoes of his past than aids for his future. For example, he phones his old film teacher, Simmons St. Jean, with the intent of discovering the staging for a scene he hopes to recreate from Kurosawa's Ikiru. In doing so, he cannot resist offering some unrelated news about the sex life of an old girlfriend of his whom he believed St. Jean coveted. When St. Jean then turns the tables by proving uninformative about Ikiru but too informative about the girlfriend, Bell responds with uncharacteristic vitriol, "Simmons, you're lying. You're a lying sack of shit, Simmons" (AA 248). These emotions, brought back from his past, immediately hinder his attempts to create his vision for the future, not only by denying him information he desires in order to shoot that vision, but also by contaminating that vision with emotions he had wanted to transcend.

In other words, Bell's present absorption leads him into past obsessions. These obsessions--usually-libido informed problems of power--are reminiscent of Bell's earlier description of "that montage of speed, guns, torture, rape, orgy and consumer packaging which constitutes the vision of sex in America" (AA 33). For example, in another of his phone calls, Bell tries to inveigle from his father accounts describing his experiences during the Bataan death march that have previously proven unnarratable to him. But this time Bell is able to latch onto a detail, the information

that his father was coerced into burying a man alive. From this fact, Bell himself constructs his father's narrative. He believes that he is restructuring the image of his father by taking a single detail and running it through his new purified media process. He does so painstakingly, spending sixteen hours painting the script on the wall of his motel room, effectively aggrandizing it, making it "larger than life." Thus, Bell creates a monument to his father that he relates to in much the same way as he related to the image of Burt Lancaster. In fact, Bell becomes so mesmerized by his "father's" narrative that while filming it he chastises the actor playing his father when he stops reading, even though he stops reading because the monologue is over. Once again his involvement with his past affects his ability to realize his present vision. Additionally, there is a difference between relating to Burt Lancaster as a larger-than-life figure and relating to his own father, since in the latter case he is not dealing with a public figure, but with a private, subjective image. Therefore, he is violating his own religious tenets by locking himself into his subjective perspective on life, making his vision more idiosyncratic, not more simple, and blurring the boundaries between the public and the private instead of clarifying them.

The same sort of confusion happens, only to an even greater degree, when Bell reflects on his mother. In his

film he hopes to recreate an encounter he had as a teenager with his mother that took place in a dimly lit pantry after a formal party in his honor. He recalls the scene as heavy with Oedipal adumbrations:

I did not move. I felt close to some overwhelming moment. In the dim light her shadow behind her consumed my own. I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge. Let it be. Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body. She was before me now, looking up, her hands on my shoulders. The sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release. It was going to happen. Whatever would happen. The cage would open, the mad bird soar, and I would cry in epic joy and pain at the freeing of a single moment, the beginning of time. Then I heard my father's bare feet on the stairs. That was all. (AA 196-97)

As was the case when filming his father's narrative, Bell becomes increasingly absorbed and disoriented while filming his recreation of this scene, so much so that he is unable to stop shooting the final shot of Sully, playing his mother, as she stands with her hands on a local townsboy's shoulders. While filming, Bell confesses to being "lost somewhere, bent back in twenty-five years of brown light" (AA 318), listening for the sound of his father's feet on the stairs and wondering what his mother was thinking about during the original encounter. He is unable to shake off the effects of his nostalgia. In fact, Bell becomes so caught up in his past that restaging it is not enough for him, and he must act out the libidinal, and perhaps logical, conclusion to the scene he just shot in a motel room with

the woman who played his mother. In this scenario, the effect of the echo not only disrupts Bell's control of his movie but also the course of his life.

It is a particularly pointed irony, then, that even Bell's lack of control draws upon romantic tradition. In order to act out his desires, Bell must first engage in high romantic scripting. Similar to the way Byron flaunted his incestuous transgressions in his poems dedicated to Augusta Leigh, Bell goes out of his way to preface and highlight his "incest." After returning with Sully to his motel room, he asks to be told a bedtime story before he beds down with her, re-emphasizing the mother-son roles they are to play in a personal form of literary dedication. Then he acts out the "incest," only to describe it immediately afterward as an "abomination." The term "abomination" works as a label for making the act and the actor larger than life in their transgressive qualities. This desire for transgressive magnitude echoes the lesson Conrad's Marlow learned from Kurtz in the African jungle about "the fascination of the abomination."<sup>16</sup> By asking to be told a bedtime story to preface the consummation of his desires, Bell codifies the act by making a tribute to it in the same way writing the script on the wall paid tribute his father's experience or, more melodramatically, as the skulls that adorn the fenceposts leading to Kurtz's cabin paid tribute to Kurtz. By repeating the word "abomination" during his description



of the sex act, Bell reaffirms, or seeks to reaffirm, the scale of the violation. Bell's "incest," then, networks together the celebrated transgressions of Byron as he dedicated poems to Augusta Leigh and the memorable abominations of Kurtz in the African jungle as he defaced his memoirs with the notation, "Exterminate all the brutes!" (HD 79).

Hence the film ends up trapping Bell in the same way that his production job trapped him. While he is filming the movie, his inability to let go of a scene is an echo of his inability to "control the image" that led him to quit his production job. His assignation with Sully suggests that the media "image" more than ever determines his actions. This unpredictable movement of echoes brings Bell back to a crisis similar the one that prompted his initial journey, and the result is a novel in the form of an echo: a novel of repetition through uncanny difference.

Following his Oedipal affair, Bell hopes to escape from the bind into which the movie echo snared him by trying a more direct approach to merging with the image. He gets rid of the film medium separating him from the romantic west and sets out to merge with it more personally. He does not think this more direct merging is a departure from his attempt to refashion himself. In fact, he describes this second journey in terms still very much informed by a media image of the American west:

Then I took off on the first step of the second journey, the great seeking leap into the depths of America, wilderness dream of all poets and scoutmasters, westward to our manifest destiny, to sovereign red timber and painted sands, to the gold-transfigured hills, westward to match the shadows of my image and my self. (AA 341)

Bell's desire to match his image of the American west to his image of himself is reminiscent of his earlier desire to make a film to match his image of the American west. In effect, this second journey is an echo of the first. It is even necessitated by the similar circumstance of his becoming overly absorbed in a lifestyle that becomes uncontrollable.

Thus, Bell's second journey, westward "into the depths of America," launches another attempt to capture a kind of romantic purity. Only this time Bell is not making a film; instead, he is the film, in a sense, as he attempts to merge with the image of the American west. Once again, Bell fuses various discourses of romance into the account of his journey. He begins with the popular romantic notion of the rugged American west and the rugged Americans who occupy it. The first of these Americans is Clevenger, a vacationing Texan businessman who drives the hitchhiking Bell along a convoluted path from Missouri to Texas. In Clevenger Bell sees a man "that [in] his own youth held some dry secret of thumbing days and freight cars and nights spent with songless men in the crouched light of fires" (AA 348). He sees a link between himself and Clevenger, a bonafide

westerner, that helps him forge an image of himself as a rugged westerner.

Yet Bell has even less success in maintaining the purity of his second journey than he did with his first. The removal of the camera, the piece of technology that Bell relied upon to help him re-interpret reality, forces him to rely on role models such as Clevenger to help him facilitate merging with the romantic image he seeks. Bell sees Clevenger's twisted journey throughout the west as a journey "to search out the final extreme" (AA 362) of the rugged west, when it may just as easily be read as a chart of lost control. For example, from Bell's romantic description of his intentions, one might think this trip should conclude with the formation of a "thesis on the essence of the nation's soul" (AA 349) about which Bell has speculated; instead the journey culminates in a drunken orgy in which Bell participates with Clevenger, three of his workmen, and three Mexican prostitutes. This orgy is yet another reversal, from the ethereal to the visceral, from the spiritual essence of the soul to the physical reality of sweat, piss and blood. The orgy itself is a bizarre image of networking--people physically but impersonally merging with others. It threatens individuality by reducing individuals to interchangeable units of flesh. Of course, with inescapable irony, the orgy scene fits another western stereotype; and here, as throughout the novel, Bell's

presentation of it is excruciatingly ironic. For all his irony, though, Bell still finds himself moving from stereotype to stereotype, image to image, in an echo-effect he can never escape. In Americana an echo-effect lurks between any romantically scripted expectation and the actions one can take to realize that expectation. This was so in the case of Bell's film and his "incest," and it is so in the case of his second journey and orgy. In fact, after his participation in the orgy, Bell finds that he must escape that episode just as he needed to escape his job and later his movie.

These echoes of escape follow Bell to the island from which he narrates Americana. His island retreat is yet another attempt at a romantic escape that would promise salvation: "Often I feel I am on the verge of some great philosophical discovery. Man. War. Truth. Time" (AA 129). But, again, there appears an inescapable irony, which now appears simply as a drive toward death: "Fortunately I always return to myself" (AA 129).

As this quotation indicates, another pattern that follows Bell to his island retreat is his obsession with himself, a narcissism that leads to a slow erosion and desiccation of his life. Bell's tendency is to strip away outside involvements and replace them with self-involvements. By the time he reaches his island retreat, these substitutions are so severe that he is substituting

only himself for himself. Consider, for example, the conclusion to his daily ritual of watching the sun set: "[A]fter a while I follow my own footsteps back to the house" (AA 129). Bell's life seems trapped in ever-contracting echoes, the logical conclusion of the accelerating demystifications of his journeys. There is only the change from using other people to help him reinforce himself to using only himself to buttress himself. This contraction seems designed to control the effects of echoes by abbreviating their effect or, in Bell's terms, shortening the distances between himself and his return to himself; but the distances, and the alienating echo-effects, cannot be eliminated entirely anywhere short of the point of death.

Bell's attempt to control the echo-effects around him is a game of evasion. Gary Storoff notes that in DeLillo's subsequent novel, End Zone, Gary Harkness plays a similar game. These games, Storoff observes, are "unconscious methods of escaping the void" but "for the truly thoughtful person these strategies must inevitably fail."<sup>17</sup> The perfect image of this failure may be that Bell's completed film, the film whose completion takes him to this island, never itself escapes his networking and romantic obsessions. Consider how Bell describes it:

Viewed in the sequence in which it was filmed, the movie becomes darker and more silent as it progresses. There are the Fort Curtis segments. There are demonstrations, speeches, parades,

riots. There is a vacation I took in Vermont, and people entering my apartment, and selected parts of a love affair. Then there are long unedited scenes in which friends and strangers declaim their madness to the camera. At this point I dispensed with sound. There are newspaper stands, store windows, bus terminals and waiting rooms. There are nuns, hundreds of them, so very black and white, perfect subjects in their long procession, soundless as beads passing through a hand. I returned to individuals briefly--women and boys in hospital corridors, deaf-mutes playing chess, people in tunnels. (AA 346)

The movie oscillates between images of polar extremes, points where individuals stand apart from the masses and in some way insist on themselves and points where people become lost in the masses. Between these extremes lie people in abeyance, in waiting rooms or in tunnels, waiting to be swept to one extreme or another. The list itself is networked together so efficiently as to blur the distinction between points of distinction and points of merging, as in a directionless montage of media images.

On the island, Bell still finds himself in that condition of crisis that prompted so many of his attempts at escape. However, now he has reached the point, that point of a vision taken to an extreme, where there is no further place into which to escape; and still he is poised between extremes. On the one hand, there are his movie and his book about it. These represent Bell's systemic death, the possibility that he has lost his life to the echoing images that he has created to represent it. On the other hand, there is Bell's isolation. He has reduced his outside

entanglements to such an extent that he lives as his own icon. His life is designed to make and maintain an image of himself; he lives, as he points out, to return to his own footsteps. From this perspective Bell seems to have lost individuality by becoming lost in the echo of his own desiring being. This is the trap, the extreme, of messianic death.

Bell is left viewing his life between two polar extremes that he can recognize, but that recognition does not yield him any control. This futility is the result of seeking a metaromance in a world bounded by an irreducible multiplicity of culturally scripted romantic forms. For David Bell, within these bounds is left a life stripped of the qualities that its owner originally found worth reflecting upon, and lost in those reflections dangles a religion suspended between the twin absurdities of a messiah in isolation and an icon in a vault.

### The Knot

In his first three novels DeLillo examines characters who respond to the complexities of the technological world by insisting on their own individuality. These characters are looking for ways to find personal growth in a world that prioritizes technological progress. DeLillo models their attempts after one historical formulation of individual progress, that of the mythic hero. The birthright of this

hero is to reconcile himself to the community from which he is at first alienated. His inner progress eventually leads to the progress of the collective when he returns to the social sphere to tell his story.<sup>18</sup>

Up through Great Jones Street, DeLillo's protagonists are contemporary versions of mythic heroes: the filmmaker, the football player and the rock star. David Bell, Gary Harkness, and Bucky Wunderlick are characters of great ego who, in the grand tradition of mythic heroes, try to master their private selves in order to remold the public world. They fail because the world is too complex to be conquered; this same complexity makes mythic versions of individual progress simplistic as well. As Frank Lentricchia observes in his introduction to New Essays on White Noise, there are "no 'individuals' who are not expressions of--and responses to--specific historical responses."<sup>19</sup> The world now devours its myths, turning those who aspire to be heroes or geniuses into functions of history. Thus, in his middle period of works, ranging from Ratner's Star through The Names, DeLillo treats the systemic death of the individual as already understood to have taken place.

Beginning in 1976 with the publication of Ratner's Star, DeLillo examines how the public and increasingly technological world has come to devour its myths, or, better put, to subsume them into an overriding myth of progress. His second section of novels emphasizes historic looks at



systems--such as co-operative science, international government, and multi-national corporations--that are the contemporary representations of the patriarchal monomyth. Accordingly, DeLillo emphasizes structural development in his presentation of them.<sup>20</sup> The image of the mythic self progressing through time is replaced by the image of the system progressing through time, with the individual bound in the system.

Similar to the way he depicted individuals in his earlier novels, DeLillo depicts systems as operating between polar extremes--in this case between the extremes of Eden and Utopia, or heaven. He sees cultural developments as linear systemic movements, either trying to recapture Eden or progress toward heaven, and, accordingly, he re-images the threat that the approach to either extreme brings about. "Systemic death," for the American culture, is marked by a return to an embrace of simplicity, as illustrated, for example, in the revival of eastern mysticism during the seventies.<sup>21</sup> Glen Selvy experiences such an awakening in the latter half of Running Dog.<sup>22</sup> "Messianic death" is represented by the totalized culture. LeClair envisions a benign version of this complex systemitazing when in his concluding argument to In the Loop he describes "what is now natural" as "systems among systems" (ITL 229).<sup>23</sup> Yet even LeClair acknowledges a vaguely portentous side to this evolution when he notes that "inherent uncertainty" and

"mysteriousness" unfailingly accompany it. In DeLillo's middle fiction, the Honduran cartel of Ratner's Star and the CIA cover company Radial Matrix of Running Dog are examples of conglomerates derived from these imbedded and ominous systems within systems.

DeLillo finds that the extremes described above fit into historic views of progress. For example, he sees spiritual progress as striving for the attainment of the romantic notion of the as yet unrealized essential being, and technological progress as a potential panacea soothing the liberal humanist desire to solve political, social, economic, and environmental ills. DeLillo's examination of contemporary views of progress suggests that they are extensions of romantic images that have themselves become knotted in postmodern chaos. For example, Ihab Hassan writes of a similar knot, developed between romantic metaphor and romantic irony, that he sees as ushering us into the postmodern scene: "The language of the former, merging with the chaotic flux of reality, aspires to All; the language of the second, canceling reality into pure order of number, aspires to Nothing."<sup>24</sup> Systemic complexity, then, is the logical extension of the romantic self re-imaged in technology, or as DeLillo describes it in White Noise, "Technology with a human face" (WN 211).

DeLillo sees the logic of systemic thought as based on the possibility of understanding coupled with the idea that

part of that understanding is that one can never fully understand.<sup>25</sup> Thus, this logic encourages a dualistic mindset that embraces both ends of his polar extremes. For example, in The Names, James Axton, in his job as a systems analyst, experiences a sense of accomplishment for ably participating in a vast and interactive communications network and a feeling of simple humility in the face of that network. These dual impulses merge when he finds himself jetting all over the world to uncover the mystery behind a murderous ascetic cult about which he has become obsessed.

Since he sees his motivations as contradictory (trying to locate the ascetic through nimble applications of the technological), Axton professes that they are a mystery to him. This mystery is the result of his realization that "reality" is no longer explained satisfactorily by sanctified fact, and he is thus left with a tenuous hold on that reality, coupled with an insistence on the technological lifestyle in which it is ostensibly grounded. The tension Axton feels is similar to that Raynond Olderman describes in the novel of the sixties, which he believes led to "a blurred distinction between fact and fiction . . . in the events, the people, the experiences and sensations of everyday life"<sup>26</sup> Olderman goes on to suggest that this tension fosters "a growing sense of the mystery of fact itself" (BW 3) while at the same time the ever-increasing number of facts made available to the general public by the

government and through the media makes the claim for progress seem undeniable as well. By this formulation, increasing progress means increasing mystery.

In his early novels DeLillo examined the possibility for romantic personal development in a world innundated by technological facts. He makes the mystery of technological facts a pervasive theme in his novels beginning with Ratner's Star by suggesting that it is the result of the marriage of romantic and systemic visions. As such, it is part of the logic of progress, the same logic that buttresses his polar extremes, and he applies a scientific methodology in his exploration of this union. In other words, he explores mystery as he finds it in its various systemic forms: among them physical and social science, religion, history and literary genre. By exposing the structure of these forms, DeLillo hopes to demystify mystery, make it be seen as a political consequence of the logic of progress.

At the same time, DeLillo sees in mystery the only ontological explanation for human experience, which, in Olderman's terms, has eluded our "attempt to apprehend and make sense of each day with just the naked eye and the vulnerable psyche" (BW 2-3). Therefore, DeLillo also tries to extract mystery from the realm of systemic logic and revivify it in the realm of daily existence. If mystery underlies ordinary "sense," ordinary sense may yet be

reconstituted in more radical, less oppressive, "mysterious" forms.

Thus, in the novels of his second phase, DeLillo takes a two-step approach to examining postmodern identity. First, he attempts to expose the structures of systems, drawing out the ideologies of mystery and romance that inform identities within them. In effect, DeLillo exaggerates what he calls "naked structure" in an attempt to expose how cumbersome that structure actually is.

Running Dog, Players and The Names all conflate types and forms of these naked structures. For example, Running Dog is a spy mystery framed around a government conspiracy, challenged by a protagonist who is depicted as a contemporary knight.<sup>27</sup> Systems, mystery and romance are thrown together in the novel's "naked" structure. The result is a tension in the novel between the demands of a tight, almost reductive, plot and an overburdened one.<sup>28</sup> The novel's very design challenges the mindset that superficial unity yields harmony. What actually prevails in these novels is the structure that passes for harmony; the individuals caught up in that structure, like the contemporary knight Glen Selvy in Running Dog, sacrifice themselves in order to perpetuate a system that does not exist in the simplicity in which they conceive it. In other words, DeLillo concludes that systemic logic demands that

the subject cultivate a position of systemic mastery that is itself deficient.

Thus, DeLillo's second step is to discredit the idea of mastery. As he attempts to unravel the narrative of mastery, DeLillo concurrently attempts to develop an alternative narrative of progress as mystery. This narrative differs from its predecessor by being more associative, fictive, what one of DeLillo's characters in Ratner's Star describes as "fanciful." This narrative is first suggested in Ratner's Star in the works of the eccentric scientist Orang Mohole, who calls for some "make-believe" in order to theorize his special brand of relativity. It reappears in the "private language" of "unfinished sentences, childlike babbling, [and] animal noises" (ACH 84) Pammy and Lyle Wynant use to speak to each other in Players and reaches a particularly full elaboration in the concluding section of The Names--an excerpt from a fictionalized biography written by Axton's son, Tap, describing a priest who induces glossolalia in a small town church. In fact, the way this narrative taps into history makes it an incipient model (befitting its young author) for the fictive narrative that DeLillo hopes can resist appropriation. Energetic misspellings, such as "gang green" and "glossylalya," make it distinct from the history it records, and neither the mastery of that history nor its proper formal presentation in language is crucial to its

understanding. It is a fiction that, in Tap's words, is unwilling to "yeeld."

DeLillo's first attempt at this narrative shift occurs in Ratner's Star. Appropriately, the novel begins with a departure, as the novel's fourteen year-old child genius protagonist, Billy Twillig, leaves behind his family to work in a secret government thinktank, Field Experiment One. After doing so, he will find that he has left behind the narrative in which the world is knowable and the self is replete with potential and replaced it with a narrative in which the world is unknowable and the self's only hope for growth comes by rejecting popular narratives of potential and progress.

Accordingly, Ratner's Star frames its examination of progress around perhaps the oldest narrative of progress, that found in the history of mathematics. DeLillo dissects this history, working against the assumption of the certitude of numbers. (This certitude is widely recognized at least to the extent that the rules governing the application of numbers are carefully structured.) At the beginning of the novel, Billy accepts this certitude: "Mathematics [makes] sense" (RS 13) is his assertion as he reflects upon his summons to Field Experiment One to assist in decoding a message from Ratner's Star in deep space. And, for Billy, since numbers make sense, they can be relied upon to solve problems.

Billy's faith in the stability of the foundations of mathematics is suggestive of the faith DeLillo finds supporting the operation of any system. This emphasis on foundations is perhaps why DeLillo explains Ratner's Star as an attempt at a novel of "naked structure" (ACH 86). DeLillo exposes the structure of math (and, by doing so, he hopes, of structures in general) to meticulous scrutiny to see if its "sense" can remain intact. He sees mathematics as paradigmatic of contemporary systemic structure because while it is a field that should make sense, it is also a field full of "secret knowledge" that may or may not be discoverable. Thus, he explains the novel's structure as "weaving this secret life of mankind into the action of the book in the form of a history of mathematics" (ACH 86). This weaving of the mysterious into history becomes the novel's image of progress.

However, before he can forge his own narrative of progress, DeLillo must first unravel its reigning historical narrative. He does this through his emphasis on form. In effect, the characters of Ratner's Star are created to comment on the system within which they function. DeLillo, himself, acknowledges that in his design for the novel "the people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on" (ACH 86). As a result, the novel emphasizes the history of math, particularly as that history suggests



progress, then, by overdeveloping the history behind that progress, questions where progress leads.<sup>29</sup>

Ratner's Star offers at least two perspectives that suggest progress does not "lead" to the ends it has historically implied. The first of these perspectives proposes that progress involves making connections that will eventually bend polar extremes back upon themselves.<sup>30</sup> In Ratner's Star, DeLillo suggests that this movement by presenting mathematical history in a mirror design: each chapter of the first half is inspired by the contributions of a specific mathematician, but it is only in the second half of the novel that the mathematicians are revealed, in reverse order.

The thematic structure of Ratner's Star suggests all narratives depicting progress bend back upon themselves. For example, DeLillo appropriates the genre expectations of science fiction--a futuristic setting, an extraterrestrial message--to launch an investigation into the assumptions of the scientific past. Within these collapsing extremes the sense of causality is gone. For instance, Billy cuts his finger at the end of the novel, but it is in the first chapter of the novel that he is described as wearing a bandage for the cut. Throughout Ratner's Star, DeLillo suggests that opposites do not stay opposed even as they denote strong demarcations.

Since this set of contradictions comprises the history of mathematics, and, by extension, history in general, Ratner's Star suggests that the acquisition of knowledge is not linear, and so not conventionally historical. As he recounts his experience during the novel's conception, DeLillo explains that he learned this lesson first hand: "Connections led to other connections. I began to find things I didn't know I was looking for" (ACH 86). In other words, for DeLillo, the naked structure is never simple.

This discovery led him to the second image for the movement of progress in the novel, in his words, "down the rabbit hole" (ACH 86). DeLillo points out that the two sections of Ratner's Star, "Adventures" and "Reflections" are structurally modeled after Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. In the first chapter "Substratum," Billy is figuratively led down the rabbit hole by his mentor, Robert Softly. Later on in the novel, Softly is described as holding a white rabbit in his lap, emphasizing the connection.

The high-tech rabbit's hole into which Billy is led is the location of DeLillo's parable of progress. Figuratively, Billy is kept in the dark of uncertainty even as he is promised to be taken to the light of knowledge. In fact, Billy has been recruited to seek that light, and to seek enlightenment in general, but, in DeLillo's formulation, darkness is a precondition for light. Through

another depiction of mutually dependent polar extremes, DeLillo critiques the narrative of progress by suggesting that it is designed never to fulfill expectations. Instead, it must protract one's engagement in the search, as the only way it can maintain its yoke upon the subject.

However, the rabbit's hole also provides an image for the non-linear knowledge DeLillo sees as crucial to re-imagining progress. DeLillo points out that in Ratner's Star "the characters keep bouncing between science and superstition" (ACH 86). These extremes can arguably be represented by the dual inspirations for the novel of math and fantasy. Simultaneously shoving them down the rabbit's hole brings these extremes together, knotting them in a way that belies conventional understanding. For instance, when describing numbers, DeLillo says, "Numbers work in such surprising ways it's hard not to feel a sense of mystery and wonder" (ACH 86). In this way, numbers are Wonderland. By the same token, one of Carroll's primary interests--symbolic logic--becomes a dominant theme in the final part of the novel.<sup>31</sup> In this way, Wonderland becomes science. DeLillo suggests that seeing knowledge as progress perpetuates a fantasy, but that reconfiguring knowledge as a fantasy might help forge a new understanding of knowledge.

Billy Twillig is an appropriate hero for DeLillo's emphasis on changing the popular conception of knowledge and progress. Physically, he is a down-scaled version of the

mythic hero, a slight, fourteen-year-old genius who in one sense can thus easily be manipulated. The opening image of the novel, Billy encased in a new "Sony 747" jet being propelled forward, underscores his condition as overwhelmed by the structures around him, as does the image of Field Experiment One, itself a vast complex, containing a horde of geniuses in a hive, drones to the queen-bee technology. Billy is immediately immersed into what Bell, Harkness, and Wunderlick try to resist--the complexity that threatens to destroy one's sense of self.

But whereas resistance was the focus of the previous novels, in Ratner's Star it is merely a formality. Billy will get swallowed up in the complex; it is inevitable--the complex and the novel are designed for it. DeLillo says of Ratner's Star, "I wanted the book to become what it was about" (ACH 86). Accordingly, the complex is just that--the residents of Field Experiment One work and live in chambers called "canisters" and Billy must walk through a series of subcorridors and an actual labyrinth before reaching his quarters. Personal interaction is discouraged--residents are requested to communicate with each other via the "limited input modules" (RS 39) through which each is plugged into the rest of the complex. Billy's physical isolation is crystallized after a workman in the complex plays upon Billy's sexual curiosity and entices him to some

voyeurism. He is caught and flees from his victim and accomplice:

The boy hurried out of the workroom and got on the nearest elevator. For a long time, in robe and slippers, he walked in and out of arcades, suede sitting rooms, meditational suites, past miniature waterfalls, around ornamental fountains, under arched gardens, through reference libraries, lush saunas, empty game rooms, totally lost, thinking wistfully of his crisp little bed. (RS 43)

The novel's emphasis on structure demands that its characters also be swallowed metaphorically. Billy, for example, becomes increasingly abstracted from ordinary concerns. LeClair notes that flashbacks to his early childhood occur less frequently as his tenure at the complex continues, and his sexual curiosity, an impetus for adventure in the early part of the novel, diminishes. LeClair suggests that Billy's adventure might be along the path to becoming pure idea. He points to a passage describing Billy's attraction to "the lure of a submoronic mode of being . . . a desire to subsist on minims of specific being" (RS 237-238) as a response to his prolonged exposure to the structures of Field Experiment One (ITL 118).

Part of this immersion in structure results from Billy's interaction with others who have already spent considerable time in the complex. They are themselves abstractions, marked by physical deformities, quirks of habit or speech, weird names, and eccentric desires. They

are, as LeClair puts it, "idea types" who "mouth concepts for Billy's consideration" (IL 118).

The range of ideas these characters mouth corresponds to the range of divergent influences infused into systemic history. Thus, it covers extremes in time (ranging from Pythagoras to Georg Cantor) and extremes in space (beginning in a jet high in the air and ending in an antrum far under ground), but these extremes are inevitably bound up in contributing to Billy's "progress." Ratner's Star develops a series of such polar extremes--progress-regress, internal-external, individual-collective--that frame the events of the novel.<sup>32</sup> In this way it is like its predecessors. However, unlike those novels, Ratner's Star concentrates on how one always seems to be lost in the collapsed ground between extremes. A good image for this errancy is Space Brain Complex, the computer center for Field Experiment One. Like Billy, the various scientists at work in it have been gathered for a purpose--to respond to the message from Ratner's Star. But, at the same time, as one character points out, "I'm not sure any of us knows why we're here" (RS 29). Thus, they both serve a purpose and flounder in high-tech uncertainty. In both these ways, the scientists feed the structure. They collect and circulate interchangeable facts that keep them trapped in uncertainty while they work for progress.

The novel's emphasis on "uncertain progress" is why the message from what are called the "ARS extants" of Ratner's Star functions as paradigmatic of the world of the novel as a whole: it conflates knowledge and mystery.<sup>33</sup> For example, the project of Space Brain Complex is kept a secret from the general public, from scientists from other nations, from other scientists in Field Experiment One, and from some of the scientists working on aspects of the project. In addition, the message itself is of course a mystery. Like Field Experiment One and Space Brain Complex, it is a mystery that is technologically advanced. It is an extension of the progress of Space Brain; it seems to come from where science wants to go, combining the ostensible polar extremes of knowledge and mystery.

Billy begins the novel confident of knowledge and resistant to mystery. Charles Molesworth, for example, observes, "His is a temperament drawn to demystification."<sup>34</sup> Billy makes this point abundantly clear in his response to an observation by the complex's "scientist-administrator" who believes that the workings of simple whole numbers are a mystery: "I don't think we can talk about it being a mystery. When you talk about difficulty, that's one thing, the difficulty of simple arithmetic. But mystery, forget about, because that's another subject" (RS 23). For Billy, the difference between difficulty and mystery is that difficulties can more rationally be mastered. Approaching

adulthood, Billy expects more experience will lead to more knowledge and thus less mystery. In the course of the novel, he will have to "learn" differently.

As in Donald Barthelme's Snow White, the foundations of knowledge in Ratner's Star are depicted as unknowable. In its presentation of information excess, the novel demonstrates how excess in general re-inscribes the idea of progress by keeping an emphasis on knowledge without making knowledge masterable. Ratner's Star suggests that since extending the mere form of knowledge re-inscribes the narrative of progress, political groups in western culture can help to determine their ends by obfuscating them.<sup>35</sup> For example, Elux Troxl, a representative of a vaguely nefarious international banking cartel, explains how the cartel exploits economies: "We manipulate abstract levels of all theoretical monies in the world today . . . The concept-idea of money is more powerful than money itself" (RS 145-146). The "concept-idea" of money is more powerful than money itself because it is an ever-changing "naked structure." Thus, to maximize its political influence, the cartel attempts to align itself with the change, not the money. Like the scientists at Space Brain complex, and like "sign tests" in general, monies are commodities that can be controlled through the very excess that seems to violate controls.



In Ratner's Star, the goal of any scientific scheme is to appropriate the uncontrollable and so extend its structure, a process comparable to that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno describe through which scientific enlightenment reverts to new forms of mythology.<sup>36</sup> This movement is evident in Space Brain complex as the goal of the project changes from decoding the message from Ratner's Star to constructing a language (Logicon) in which to answer it. This process is justified by the authorities at Space Brain as a unifying experience. For example, Softly explains its justification to Billy: "If we're going to behave as a single people, as rational human beings who can inhabit the same planet, we desperately need goals and pursuits that can unite us" (RS 274). However, as the Logicon project proceeds, it becomes increasingly idiosyncratic, seemingly without relevance to anything except itself. Softly also maintains, then, that Logicon is important despite the message:

The very uselessness of Logicon, according to Rob, is what makes the project a pure act of intellect and therefore supremely enriching. If it had been determined that the ARS extants were not Earth-dwellers but extraterrestrials (the message originating, say, in a solar system on the other side of the galaxy), the entire project, according to Rob, would have been endangered. To transmit an actual reply to the actual message-senders (or their succeeding generations) would be to miss the point of the whole thing. (RS 409)

This point is, according to Softly, to develop a

"Transgalactic language," a "pure and perfect mathematical

logic" (RS 274), which unifies the galaxy only in form, while actual existent beings are considered as logically irrelevant to its point. Yet even this appropriation is compromised. Softly does not realize that since the message originated from earth, it has a context of existent beings and a message to deliver to them.

Thus, the ARS extant signal proves to be a model for the novel as a whole. It is both a look within authorized by a voice beyond and a look beyond inspired by a voice from within. One character describes it as proof, "We get back only what we ourselves give" (RS 405). His characterization suggests that science demonstrates karma. And the message is similar to karma: both are primitive mysteries that are "rediscovered" to offer contemporary enlightenment. Logicon is then the attempt at an advanced language that can respond to a primitive mystery. Extremes meet, or, more accurately, it is determined that they have co-occupied the same space all along in an example of what the novel calls the "unsolveable knot of science and mysticism" (RS 308). This knot ties extremes together: exterior and interior, unity and complexity, all of the oppositions carefully set up in the novel. Progress, then, is a loop, but one whose ends are lost in the midst of a knot. The novel hopes to dispel the notion that the knot impedes progress and suggests that we reconceive of the image of progress as a knot.

In other words, in order for mathematics, or anything else in the novel, to make sense, one has to restructure sense. This notion is played out in the way the novel depicts mathematical history. LeClair suggests that "Adventures" traces mathematical history to a point of profound optimism crystallized in Alfred North Whitehead's assessment of abstraction:

Nothing is more impressive than the fact that as mathematics withdrew increasingly into the upper regions of ever greater extremes of abstract thought, it returned back to earth with a corresponding growth of importance for the analysis of concrete fact. . . the paradox is now fully established that the utmost abstractions are the true weapons with which to control our thought of concrete fact. (ITL 115)

This metamathematical optimism is unwound in "Reflections," which begins by citing Godel's portentous incompleteness theorem, described in Ratner's Star as "recursive undecidability" (RS 368), and then proceeds to question the basis for all the mathematical achievements that led to the optimism expressed by Whitehead.

This re-examination shows mathematics to be more accurately characterized as "undecidable" than "certain." However, DeLillo suggest this quality of undecidability is actually consistent with the historical narrative of progress, which is only politically valuable if it is undecidable. Thus, DeLillo concludes that one must alter form in order to alter progress. For example, as the plot of Ratner's Star turns back on itself to question its

theoretical and thematic foundations, it progresses. In this way, it proposes a mystery: a model that is both linear and circular, like the undecidable notion of progress in western culture. In DeLillo's knot, however, when the ends of progress meet, not only has one not returned to the beginning, but one has been forced to add a dimension to one's thinking. For DeLillo, this dimension is fiction, the counter-narrative to historical progress that DeLillo creates by knotting together the images of the mystery of science and the science behind mystery.

Ratner's Star loops back thematically to see if its protagonists can untie the knot of historical conceptions of progress while anticipating the fictive knot that to DeLillo's mind more accurately depicts progress. For example, Billy is contacted by his predecessor at Space Brain Complex, the celebrated mathematician and astrophysicist Henrik Endor. Endor fled Space Brain complex to live in a hole in the ground when he failed to decode the message. He cannot accept failure because he is progress oriented. When Billy visits him in his hole, Endor explains that while giving him his invitation he looked over Space Brain again, "[h]oping it would all come together in this one last look" (RS 85). Endor's notion of it all coming together is a meliorist's view of science, focused on advancing from one polar extreme to another. Endor believes these extremes can or should adequately frame reality. When

he finds that being a scientist means "just the opposite of what people believe it to mean" (RS 87), the interplay between extremes disturbs his focus. His reaction to that interplay is to retreat into a hole in the ground. Ironically, Endor's escape into filth can also be seen as an escape into primitivism, the other end of progress, and so connected to its origins.

Endor's example suggest that if one determines one's goals according to achieving progress, the recognition that its ends are forever coming together--in fact, never discretely exist apart--can drive one crazy. This knot of extremes in one sense gives purity and filth the same referent. Endor cannot accept this; his desire to reach an extreme is extreme. He tells Billy, "We don't extend the senses to probe microbe and universe. We deny the senses. We deny the evidence of the senses. A lifetime of such denial is what sends people into larvae-eating rages" (RS 87). He recognizes that from his perspective abstract knowledge, which defines goals, is privileged over sense data, which "defines" where we live. Endor's suggestion that we take our senses out into deep space is his fictive narrative (indeed, it could only work in science fiction) for negotiating the extremes; yet even this solution, by its emphasis on reclassifying knowledge, too much reflects his scientist's training. However, his endorsement of the physical senses to help determine the abstract makes some

sense to those who want to avoid the closed loop of progress in which Endor finds himself trapped.

Billy faces Endor's trap thematically as his successor and dramatically as he encounters the mystery of science pervasive in the complex. Like Endor, Billy takes comfort in the purity of mathematics. (Recall his contention that "Mathematics made sense" (RS 13)). However, this sense only applies to a specialized version of reality. Billy, for example, explains about his work in Zorg theory, "A zorg is a kind of number. You can't use zorgs for anything except in mathematics. Zorgs are useless. In other words they don't apply" (RS 20). For Billy's desire for sense to pervade, he must remain immersed in mathematics. This desire for immersion attracts him to Field Experiment One, a place that represents the pinnacle of progress, or, as one character puts it, "the fulfillment of mankind's oldest dream . . . knowledge" (RS 21).

However, Field Experiment One is also the rabbit's hole, the place that will distort that knowledge with more and sometimes contradictory knowledge. As Alice experiences physical distortions once down the rabbit hole, Billy encounters abstract distortions that alter his view of progress as sense.

The best image for the rabbit-holing of sense Billy encounters is "Moholean relativity." Its theorizer, Orang Mohole, explains the workings of a mohole:

A Mohole traps electromagnetic information, among other things, and then either releases it or doesn't. It's as though the mohole were a surface that absorbs light and sound and then reflects either or both to another part of the universe. But it's not a surface and it doesn't absorb. It's a mohole. It's part of a theoretical dimension lacking spatial extent and devoid of space and time. Value-dark in other words . . . If Moholean relativity is valid . . . we'll one day witness events that do not conform to the predispositions of science. We may be confronted, pay attention, with a totally unforeseen set of circumstances. (RS 181-82)

Moholes are the other side of relativity. They propose an alternative narrative, a different set of principles generated in the first one-thousandth of a second of the universe, the time, as Mohole explains, for which science cannot account. Like relativity, they are derived from mathematical progress as they point to its foundations. However, as Mohole explains, they are work with a "high madness content" (RS 183), again sending scientific sense down the rabbit's hole.

It is this mohole distortion that tells the scientists that the message did not originate from Ratner's Star. In other words, a distorted science prompts them to check the coherence of their own scientific foundations. As a result Billy, Softly and five others literally move further down the hole of the complex to its foundations, which, significantly enough, are unfinished.

In the unfinished foundations, progress and the primitive meet. Here, for Billy and the others, there is no safety-net of sense. They experience the value darkness of

Moholean relativity not only as they uncover its application to the ARS extant's message but also as they examine their own personal foundations. This movement from the mathematically abstract to the personally concrete counterpoints the tracing of the progress of mathematics towards abstraction developed in the "Adventures" section of the novel.

Billy is resistant to such a science of the personal, and his personal arrogance comes back to haunt him. This return is not unexpected, since Billy's fame for work in Zorg theory stems from his development of the stellated twilligon, a boomerang-shaped figure used to represent mathematical relationships that are both discrete and continuous. Billy's pure work (remember, he maintains that zorgs "don't apply") depicts a model for polar extremes. Billy cannot see the connection between his work and reality, but, like a boomerang, it comes back to strike him.

Billy's stellated twilligon is also the shape of the universe Orang Mohole assumes in his work in Moholean relativity. Therefore, Billy is implicated in the narrative that opposes "sense." The theoretical dimension of Moholean relativity becomes concrete when it is discovered that the earth is mohole-intense and is thus a place where the unanticipated may occur. In other words, science discovers that sense is not entirely applicable, and Billy's non-applicable work become the most applicable model for



scientific non-sense. He finds, as does Endor, that he is taken to the opposite place from where he wants to be.

This is the rabbit hole into which DeLillo has led us-- a place where extremes meet. This is where the technologically advanced and logically simple Logicon project, inspired by a message from outer space and inner earth, occurs in the subterranean foundation of a vast complex. Progress/regress, or any oppositions, refer back and forth in so many ways as ultimately to be indistinguishable from one another. Thus, it is an appropriate place for DeLillo to launch a new narrative of progress, one to whose understanding all abstract and concrete experiences, all mental and physical phenomena, can contribute. Thus, the scientists who abandon the Logicon project for more personal concerns are also not abandoning the project. Like Endor, they are continuing their work after passing through the rabbit's hole, except with the possibility that their recognition of collapsed polar extremes may save their sanity.

Billy, befitting his designation as Alice, especially must readjust his perspective on the mystery surrounding narratives of progress. When he first begins work on decoding the message, we are given a description of how he sees his relationship to his field:

As a mathematician he was free from subjection to reality, free to impose his ideas and designs on his own test environment . . . What was at stake, in effect, was his own principle of intelligence

or individual consciousness; his identity, in short. (RS 117)

Viewing life between polar extremes, Billy believes he can deny the applicability of his work and so use it to forge a mastery of his self. However, in the antrum, locked into work that collapses in unforeseen dimensions around him, his appraisal of self is threatened. Even as he attempts to control his environment by hiding within the womb of a shrouded table, he reflects that his life cannot be so easily controlled: "There is a life inside this life. A filling of gaps. There is something between the spaces. I am different from this. I am not just this but more. There is something else to me that I don't know how to reach" (RS 370). The strange "something else" is as much a factor of his identity as the rationality of mathematics.

By accepting this strange something else, Billy is able to decode the message. It indicates the time of an unexpected solar eclipse. The occurrence of the eclipse turns the earth into a mohole rabbit hole, marking the end of knowledge as sense. DeLillo realizes the threat such an end can pose. For example, the eclipse is described as advancing like a nuclear bomb, an image made more ominous when we find out that the people who predicted it were once technologically advanced and then wiped out by radiation poisoning. However, denying the significance of the eclipse can result in a larger version of the closed loop that trapped Endor. This threat becomes clear in the text when

one realizes that the scientists of logicon are working on a signal themselves, and there are vague rumors circulating outside the antrum of "Aggressions and counter aggressions" in the world of political reality.

This reality is the narrative DeLillo hopes to unwind as he replaces it with his own fictive narrative. However, he is tentative about his prospects for success. At the end of the novel, his primary protagonists, Billy and Softly, retreat into Endor's hole, the hole of failed scientific sense that stands in opposition to the fictive rabbit hole. In fact, none of the characters of Ratner's Star seem to be able to accept the re-imaging of progress that takes place in the novel. They cannot abandon scientific sense. Thus, as the novel concludes, Orang Mohole's rhetorical question, explaining why he is optimistic that Mohole relativity offers the universe a chance to become, in his words, "refreshed," looms large: "We're not so scientific that we can't have a little make-believe?" (RS 182). It is within this "make-believe" that DeLillo hopes to re-image progress. Though he remains tentative about his chances for success, the strategy of the fictive history remains prominent in his subsequent fiction.

#### Consuming Mystery

In the novels that follow Ratner's Star, DeLillo attempts to unravel the historic narratives of progress

associated with a wide range of systems. For example, Players proposes a terrorist plot designed to cripple international finance, and Running Dog examines a political conspiracy bent on suppressing the exposure of morally dubious espionage practices conducted by the CIA. These novels strive to open up new narratives of progress that combat the closed loops of progressive narratives that preceded them. In effect, DeLillo attempts to drag economic and political systems down the rabbit hole he imaged in Ratner's Star. His broadest application of this strategy occurs in The Names, in which numerous systems, ranging from semiotics to religion, are analyzed and found locked into the loop of progress. Ultimately, The Names fuses these diverse systems into its treatment of a murder mystery and concludes that we cannot yet solve the mystery of how the postmodern self has had its progress "killed" in the technological world.

However, at the end of each of these novels, DeLillo also insists that something must be done. In his uncertainty, he is very much like his narrator James Axton in The Names, who, after failing to find satisfaction in the explanations to the mysteries that abound in the novel, concludes, "Our offering is language" (TN 331) and prepares to respond to a manuscript composed for him by his son. DeLillo is similarly compelled to make further offerings. In The Names, Axton describes what he calls "oral delivery"

as "a devotional exercise, an attempt to understand through repetition" (TN 18). As DeLillo attempts to understand the myriad components that constitute the postmodern self, he also finds himself devoted to repetition.<sup>37</sup>

In a sense, DeLillo's narrators are fed back to him and he feeds them back to his readers,<sup>38</sup> all the time attempting to alter the monologic narrative he fears. The individual as feedback is an important image for considering White Noise, DeLillo's "breakthrough" novel, his first attempt at the "domestic" novel, and a pivotal turn toward an accessible, rather than idiosyncratic, political perspective. This is not to say that DeLillo does not still have his way with "daily" life. The word "feedback" takes on interesting dimensions for him, especially in the way he finds in it both basic and complex implications. Taken as a unit, the term "feedback" can mean "technical distortion," and from this connotation comes DeLillo's title, White Noise. Breaking feedback into its component words, DeLillo finds a pun. His complementary definition of "feedback" loosely refers to what sustains us--feed--and reminds us how that sustenance has a history--a back. However, these component parts are forever located in feedback, in distortion, and so one's reflections on them will always occur amidst white noise. In this way, as DeLillo examines consumerism and the American family in White Noise, he examines feedback. In fact, since his perspective can only

be distorted, as distorted as the component narratives of progress that led to the discovery of white noise, he contributes to white noise as he writes about it.<sup>39</sup>

DeLillo finds the concept of distorted progress to be a mystery. To a culture afflicted with what Lyotard calls "the postmodern condition," this mystery assures us that the dispersed, schizoid subject is a step in social evolution and nothing to be worried about after all.<sup>40</sup> Terry Eagleton compares this optimism to what he calls "the mythical positivivism of the early Wittgenstein," which opts for a classical rationality that is more or less progressive over radical critiques that may be, in Eagleton's words, "irrationalist in the worst sense" (CMP 144).

White Noise begins within this dialectic of the progressive and the irrational. Although its characters seek sense, sense does not work, yet alternatives to classical rationality prove equally unsatisfactory. Similar to Barthelme's protagonists, DeLillo's characters cannot find a meaningful whole behind an existence distorted into fragments. Existence within white noise is full of interruptions; this fact explains the random lists that intrude upon the narrative and upon the characters themselves. These interruptions at first seem to open the characters up to the possibility of a discontinuous history, and the existential freedom that accompanies it, but instead

they are claimed by postmodern capitalism, and thus end up exuding commercial white noise.

In other words, the characters in the novel are the sites of ostensibly competing marketing strategies that in actuality fill the gaps of a totalizing capitalist system. This system will persist as long as fragmented desires are addressed with the intent to have them made whole. From a capitalist perspective, this intent turns consumers into what Lyotard calls "good" conductors of intensities (though for Lyotard, the "good" conductor opposes rampant consumerism).<sup>41</sup> Taking a cue from Lyotard, DeLillo suggests that the "good" of unrestricted consumerism is actually threatening. \* In White Noise, this threat is literal--the by-products of technology cause life-threatening disasters--and figurative--the self becomes dependent on commodities to reach "fullness of being."

Thus, in its themes of death and technology, or its theme of the interrelation between death and technology, White Noise depicts the repetition and alteration of mystery. It invites us both to master technology--via microbes, simulated catastrophes and futuristic drugs--and to abandon ourselves to it--through waves and radiation, banking systems and computer link-ups. In effect, we are invited to master our selves and to abandon them; and, as we are invited to do both, we are invited to do neither. This inclusive perspective is typically postmodern in the

way it accepts the play of difference and repetition, but nostalgic in the way it insists that in that play something is lost.<sup>42</sup>

This loss exists because value is measured in economic terms. In White Noise, DeLillo speculates about whether the struggle for meaning exists beyond the affirmative power found in acts of immediate consumer gratification. Terry Eagleton alleges that "the contemporary subject may be . . . a dispersed, decentered network of libidinal attachment, emptied of ethical substance and physical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion" (CMP 145). In White Noise, DeLillo uses the Gladney family as a test case to see whether this condition, the result of postmodern capitalism's subsumption of various narratives of progress, can be altered.

Presided over by the narrator, Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill, the Gladney family lives the postmodern crisis. Their nuclear family is almost ludicrously extended--Jack and his wife Babette live with four children--Heinrich, Steffie, Denise and Wilder (there are other children dispersed through two continents)--from six different marriages. This "relative" instability in the home, the ostensible foundation of American cultural life, is a reflection of the instability in the world they occupy. The Gladney's are constantly



facing crises: an unspecified chemical infusion closes the grade school, a toxic chemical cloud forces the residents of the town to evacuate. In effect, life is threatening. The Gladney's combat this threat through acts of consumerism. Throughout the novel, Jack describes the solace and fulfillment people find in purchasing. However, consumption also reaches a point of danger. This danger point is crystallized in the text when Babette responds to the barrage of threats she faces in daily life by turning to a futuristic drug, Dylar, to combat her resultant fear of death. Dylar is an experimental drug, replete with possible harmful side-effects, and Babette is a research subject. DeLillo uses Babette as an example to illustrate how a dependence on commodities can turn one into a commodity within a consumer system.

In White Noise, DeLillo concedes the operation of a totalizing capitalist system, but he does not concede that the Gladney's, or anyone else, must be enslaved by it. His perspective is reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's observation about systems, "The point is that systems, even total systems, change; but the question about the tendencies and the laws of motion of that change is also accompanied by the relatively distinct question of the role of human agency in the process" (PM 206). As White Noise demonstrates the harmful effects of a totalizing market system, it also attempts to change that system by injecting agency into it.

White Noise begins by reconfiguring mystery in technology. As is the case in most of his novels, DeLillo has technology enframe a world of polar extremes. On the one end, White Noise depicts technology as eminently accessible. The constant hum of technology in the background of daily existence is a reassuring reminder of human progress and capability. After all, the novel is replete with examples of ways in which technology can be used and controlled: televisions and other appliances are turned on and off, telephone calls are made and received at leisure, the latest life-assisting commodities are purchased at the characters' convenience. As John Frow points out, White Noise, despite its depiction of a world of hyper-pervasive electronic media and consumerism, mimics "one of the classical aims of the realist novel: the construction of typicality."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the novel emits the sense of the everyday in its metronomic hum, a hum DeLillo describes as "a kind of radiance of dailiness."<sup>44</sup> This sense of dailiness also suggests the surrender to the idea of the market economy as natural, or, as Jameson puts it, the surrender to the idea "that no society can function efficiently without the market and that planning is obviously impossible" (PM 263).

On the other hand, that same everyday technology is beyond the characters' daily comprehension. Jack's co-worker, Murray Jay Siskend, insists that television is

loaded with "psychic data" and "coded messages" (WN 51) that people are only beginning to understand. Pointing out that the average person could not explain the principle behind radio transmissions, Heinrich asks, "What good is knowledge if it just floats in the air?" (WN 148) ~~X~~ In a postmodern world where everyday reality seems mediated and artificial, White Noise suggests that we have come close to abandoning our nostalgia for truth and meaning in favor of extending our desire for participating in what Eagleton calls the "immense desiring machine" of capitalist technology (CMP 142).

With this technology always apparent, daily life is unavoidably both simple and complex. Perhaps the best play on words DeLillo sustains throughout the novel is that on the notion of the nuclear family. Basic as building blocks, the nuclear family's constituent parts can disturbingly radiate outward. The Gladney family radiates children and ex-spouses over two continents, some of whom can be threatening (Jack's three ex-wives are all involved in espionage). Yet at the same time Jack believes he has found domestic simplicity. He relishes shopping excursions, walks home from work, and he and Babette both luxuriate in the innocence of the youngest child, Wilder, whose vocabulary has mysteriously stalled at twenty-five words. This seeming simplicity is carried over into the lists of merchandise that intermittently appear in the text. These simple

products actually penetrate the stuff of the American dream. For example, Jack hears what he calls a "beautiful and mysterious" utterance from his daughter Steffie as she sleeps.★ It turns out to be the name "Toyota Celica," a "simple brand name" that strikes Jack with "the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (WN 155).

In White Noise, the simple frequently becomes transcendent. In fact, the salient quality of experience in the novel is mysteriousness. For example, mystery enshrouds technology at both ends of the novel's polar extremes--from the most basic commodities its characters consume to the most advanced chemicals that threaten to consume them. Appropriately, "mystic mints" concludes the litany of consumables the students at the College-on-the-Hill bring back from summer vacation; and, just as appropriately, Jack discovers during the airborne toxic event, "No one seem[s] to know how a group of microorganisms could consume enough toxic material to rid the sky of such a dense and enormous cloud" (WN 160).

Mystery is also the common referent for the novel's representation of domestic community. For example, forced by Babette to watch television together each Friday night, the Gladney family one night becomes transfixed watching footage of natural disasters. They are also brought together because of the toxic cloud, and they shop together in stores in which "everything," as Murray informs us, "is

concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material" (WN 37).

As the success of the "mystery" of the supermarket hinges on the strategic placement of consumables, so does any mystery invite a marketing strategy. DeLillo establishes this condition of cultural attenuation obliquely in the opening scene of the novel when Jack Gladney assesses the parents who arrive en-masse with their children for the beginning of the fall semester:

This assemblage of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation. (WN 3-4)

As Paul A. Cantor observes, DeLillo wryly suggests that Americans are united not by "liturgies" (religion) or "laws" (politics) so much as by debased rites of passage (Cantor 49). He points to DeLillo's description of the parents--all having "conscientious suntans," the women "crisp and alert, in diet trim" and the men "distant but ungrudging . . . something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage" (WN 3) ~~as~~ examples of the kind of superficial American "lifestyles" cultivated in soft-drink commercials (Cantor 49). DeLillo suspects that Americans have been marketed into accepting an idea of culture that revolves around bountiful consumption as our primary form of growth. The Gladney family, for example, voluntarily comes together only during acts related to consumption: eating meals, shopping

at the supermarket or mall, and watching TV. It is no wonder, then, that Jack observes, "When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat" (WN 14). Consume for one's appearance, consume for one's health, leads to consume for one's spiritual well-being in an ironic re-rendering of the notion of "fullness of being."

✧ DeLillo's tongue is only half in cheek when he suggests that marketing fragmented images into an acceptable notion of mystery fills a spiritual gap in the postmodern world. The psychic data of the stores grows as the psychic data available in religions wanes. Stores are the churches of technology, providing salvation for the consumer public. However, commodities do not easily slide into the position of the godhead; they must be sold.

Therefore, DeLillo suggests that we have been manipulated into believing in the mysterious power of a technology that can bring the most advanced products to our fingertips. Michael Valdez Moses contends that this condition stems from an understanding of the world similar to what Heidegger describes in terms of facing the "essence" of technology (Moses 67). He cites a passage in which Babette, speaking to her husband, applies such an understanding to defend her use of the drug Dylar:

✧ You know how I am. I think everything is correctable. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs. This is how I am able to teach

my students how to stand, sit and walk, even though I know you think these subjects are too obvious and nebulous and generalized to be reduced to component parts. I'm not a very ingenious person but I know how to break things down, how to separate and classify. We can analyze posture, we can analyze eating, drinking and even breathing. How else can you understand the world, is my way of looking at it. (WN 191-92)

Clearly, Babette's reductive understanding of the world as pure technique is intended as a source of amusement for DeLillo's readers when it results in classes as excessive and unnecessary as those teaching breathing and eating. However, its prescription that for every problem there can be a scientific solution leads to Murray's more serious advice to Jack to "put [his] faith in technology" (WN 285).

★ In White Noise, technological acceptance ultimately becomes an expression of faith. This is so because the singular subject of postmodernism is also disjunct. Eagleton, for example, contends, "The subject of late capitalism . . . is neither the self-regulating synthetic agent posited by classical humanist ideology, nor merely a decentered network of desire, but a contradictory amalgam of the two" (CMP 145). Postmodern capitalism exploits the nebulous area in which this amalgam is formed precisely because it seems undefined. However, DeLillo suggests an emptiness remains there, the vestige of the now perceived as defunct humanist subject with its accompanying thirst for truth. ★ Postmodern capitalism attempts to quench this thirst via consumption.

The crassly mundane nature of the market society leaves an emptiness in the consumer public, which in White Noise can be dangerous. For example, when Babette follows her own advice to "correct" her fear of death by turning to the futuristic drug Dylar, she imperils herself. This move is both the result of a technological mindset and an expression of her need to fill a spiritual void.

Put more simply, Babette has internalized the marketing of mystery. To some extent, so have all of the characters in the novel. Like David Bell, they see themselves as contaminated in a network marked by extremes. For most of them, the ability to reason their way into a spiritual awe evokes an ambivalent self-reflective response. This ambivalence is especially evident in Jack's account of the responses to the brilliant sunsets that follow the dissipation of the toxic cloud:

The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. The bands of color reach so high, seem at times to separate into their constituent parts. There are turreted skies, light storms, softly falling streamers. It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scarred by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way . . . Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means. (WN 324)

While the people of Blacksmith are uncomfortable with transcendence, they are comfortable with awe. The various forms of awe they can break down into seemingly constituent



parts. On the one hand, the sunsets are undeniably aesthetically pleasing; however, on the other hand, they may also suggest the unpleasing prospect of toxic residue. These component parts--satisfaction and threat--capture what DeLillo suggests is the "spirit" of postmodern consumerism.

Internalizing the marketing mindset perpetuates and extends the market. Frow describes the reaction described by Jack above not as linear but as "interpretable not so much to infinity as within an endless loop between two contradictory poles" (NOWN 415). The reactions, and the sunsets themselves, seem to break down into constituent parts, dichotomous categories such as emotional/rational, complex/simple, threatening/pleasing, which in turn are rejected as satisfactory explanations for the phenomenon they describe at the same time they are re-inscribed as instruments to measure the experience of it. The resulting "uncertain" nature of experience promotes consumption by leaving the desire for certainty unfulfilled, encouraging people to keep seeking it through further acts of consumption.

In White Noise, the more marketable a process is the more it breaks down and re-inscribes the extremes that promote progress. For example, as previously noted, Babette teaches classes in posture, eating and walking. These courses prove to be very marketable since her students have become unsure of their natural abilities. A technological

mindset so pervasive in its insistence that everything is correctable affects them to the point that they have internalized the notion that they must always be correcting themselves.<sup>45</sup> They are caught in feedback, in a consumption loop, and, ironically, they have adopted a scientific mindset to remaster what a scientific perspective originally led them to challenge. What, then, do they find is gained in the practice of "correcting"? It is a performance of faith, the only appropriate enactment of spiritual ritual left in the technological world. Yet it is also a form of consumption itself and the conditioned response of their faith in technology.

In this collapse of extremes where ritual and science meet, the historical conception of the self has been reshaped, or, in the terms of the novel, corrected. The rugged individuals paradigmatic of American cultural identity have become dependent on knowing how to correct their behavior and then are left struggling to correct almost everything they do. As Jack recognizes, the self becomes increasingly violable, and thus increasingly less viable, in this constant reshuffling. Beginning with David Bell in Americana, DeLillo has presented numerous individuals who see themselves as the product of extreme ideologies that they must constantly refigure. In White Noise, this process of tearing down and bulwarking the self becomes externalized as well, in a bombardment of white

noise, and Jack is especially prone to experience the additional volatility

Thus, because the "marketed" individual is threatened on so many levels, Jack is consumed by thoughts of death. He experiences death all around him in the novel. He reads the obituaries to see who is dying of "natural causes" (WN 99). He hears the rumors about Mylex-suited men dying from very unnatural causes while inspecting the grade school for toxic chemicals. He learns that the sister of Old Man Treadwell, the town's "landmark" senior citizen, dies of "lingering dread," the result of becoming lost for four days at a shopping mall, her death a postmodern reformation of "natural causes."

Like technology, death is also a mystery of dimensions. Foremost, it is the largest unknowable, the experience that no one can adequately describe. Therefore, cults of mystery spring up around it, religious mystery. In addition, death's riddle provides much of the impetus for scientific progress--its end may be seen as the end of science, as in much science fiction. This end, itself, creates an ironic mystery--that so much of the application of science has resulted in death. In this same ironic vein, death is mysterious in being our only certainty even as it is shrouded in mystery. And, of course, on a more mundane level, death provides the theme for various generic forms of

mystery to be found in the mediums of film, television and literature. In other words, death is a big market.

The experience of death, then, is like that of technology and community--it has its complex and simple forms that come together to create a new kind of natural.<sup>46</sup> DeLillo suggests that this "new" natural is what postmodern capitalism markets.

Thus, "white noise" as a metaphor for technology also works as a metaphor for death. Like the various manifestations of technological white noise, death is also all around the Gladneys. It occurs literally on all levels of their existence. At work, a colleague of Jack's dies. At school, a suspected chemical leak forces an evacuation of the grade school, and in the subsequent sweep for chemicals a technician dies. At home, the family gathers around the television to watch "documentary clips of calamity and death" (WN 64). Death also occurs figuratively in various familiar guises that assault the Gladneys in a barrage of white noise, especially in Jack's teaching of Advanced Nazism, the sensationalized tabloid headlines at the grocery store, and the general TV and radio fare. These latter examples demonstrate that promoting death is just as much a factor as promoting life if one is ultimately bent on promoting consumption.

Bred into the marketing of death is the spiritual void it leaves. Jack calls this void "the daily seeping

falsehearted death" (WN 22), a death he believes arises from man's guilt in history, and this guilt then becomes complicated by his refinement of technology. It is, in other words, a mixture of perception and progress. It is not only found in the "electrical and magnetic fields" and low doses of radiation that Heinrich finds threatening in everyday exposure (WN 175), but it stems as well from the technological mindset, the need to be reaching for ultimate explanations that leave us feeling guilty when we cannot find them. Thus, Babette's classes in routine functions must be taught because, as she notes, "People like to have their beliefs reinforced" (WN 171). In fact, they must have them reinforced to avoid the sense of being failures in a community (appropriately called Blacksmith) that they thought they helped forge.

The reinforcement of which Babette speaks can no longer be provided internally, if it ever could. (DeLillo's novels would suggest otherwise.) In White Noise, people find that self-assurance is located outside the self. Ironically, the result of their dissatisfaction with consumerism will lead them back to the marketing systems in which their consumerism was formed. Heinrich, for example, when explaining that he does not know whether or not he would like to visit his mother, postulates the workings of a human brain that has been rendered an uncontrollable machine:

Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what  
anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about

something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How can you know whether something is really the thing you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? (WN 45-46)

The "correction" for this puzzling machine is thought to lie elsewhere, leading to further involvements with other machines. Jack, for instance, responds to the uncertainties suggested by Heinrich's speculations by consulting his bank machine:

I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figures on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. (WN 46)

Jack is comforted by the knowledge that his wayward brain can calculate at all. The blessing he receives from the machine parodies the mysterious blessings that religious rituals offer, appropriated here in the form of a transaction that precedes further consumption--mystery abetting marketing. Jack's assurance also suggests that he accepts that his secret code, in historically romantic terms that secret self inside the individual, is now located outside him. It is something he carries around with him on a plastic card with a magnetic strip. And he is only authenticated as a functional individual when he is hooked up to a system along with innumerable other coded selves in a market community. Thus, in the capitalism depicted in White Noise, people must put their faith in technology to

get a balance, or harmonious center, which is their benediction from the machine.

It is no wonder, then, that during a rainstorm Heinrich debates with his father over whether or not it is raining outside--since the radio forecast had called for rain later in the evening. "Your truth is no good" (WN 23), he says. One's natural or secret code is no good without an attendant system, and, thus, it is ultimately only as good as a sales pitch. Heinrich, who accumulates as much technological information as possible, is also the most manipulatable character in the novel. The need to purchase comfort is both the literal and figurative price of faith in technology. Murray says TV "welcomes us to the grid" (WN 51), but he does not mention how it can recast us within that grid, like the images on the TV screen, scrambling and rearranging our secret codes at the price of any sense of self control.

The marketing of mystery in White Noise is best captured in its depiction of the futuristic drug Dylar. Dylar is the drug Babette takes to combat her fear of death. It is so advanced that the College-on-the-Hill's "brilliant" neurochemist cannot determine how it works. She is only able to tell Jack that it is science, involving "lasers" and "polymers" in "the realm of physics" (WN 188).

In other words, Babette appeals to what in Ratner's Star is called "the unsolvable knot of science and

mysticism" (RS 308). It is within this knot that ostensible polar extremes can be acted upon, especially since this knotted area is promoted in postmodern capitalism as mystery. This quality of mystery is demonstrated when Murray suggests that generic white packaging is the last avant-garde. He claims that it is the final "bold new form" and the only one retaining the "power to shock" (WN 19). Thus, old becomes new by a sales pitch, the ends of which shock even the practitioner into feeling differently about a familiar product.

Babette desires the drug Dylar to correct her life, but its death threat appeals to her as well. For example, she lists the risks she incurred by volunteering to take the drug: "I could die. I could live but my brain could die. The left side of my brain could die but the right side could live. This would mean that the left side of my body would live but the right side would die. There were many grim specters" (WN 193). These spectres are grim and mysterious, in the sense both of inexplicable and counter-intuitive, at the same time that they are readily called to mind, demonstrating the same ironic sensibility that dominates the text (and contributes to the novel's marketability). Thus, DeLillo suggests that this sensibility cannot be dismissed, that in a world where knowledge is spread by promotion, one cannot tell what shape "progress" will next take.



Appropriately, then, the futuristic shape of Dylar comes to Babette's attention via marketing through a tabloid. Dylar, then, is part of that particular brand of white noise on the absurd end of mystery. Its existence itself could easily be visualized as a headline in a tabloid--AMAZING NEW DRUG (DISCOVERED BY ELVIS) GIVES SENSE OF IMMORTALITY. Yet its very real existence in the novel, and very potent side-effects, make it an extension of that absurd end of white noise that cannot be dismissed--like the tabloids themselves in our culture, where they are capable, for instance, of breaking up a royal marriage. Dylar's existence makes even Heinrich's caution about microwaves and TV sets seem more serious. It suggests that a virus has been promoted in all technological capitalist systems--media, educational, economic.

This infection can be seen, finally, in the way the threat of Dylar continuously changes and spreads. Its literal life-threatening aspects shift from those found in its consumption by Babette to that found in its possession by Willie Mink, the developer of Dylar, when the armed Jack demands Mink's supply of the drug. The indifferent technical description Babette affects when she describes the consequences she incurs by obtaining Dylar gives way to the self-blinding rage and raw jealousy that inspire Jack's attempt to acquire it. The channels through which the drug can be acquired change from tabloid circulation to the

detective show plot Jack appropriates to steal it from Mink. Jack becomes representative of the marketing mindset as a whole, infused with too many commercials, out of control, inspired by a bank machine brain that is now off balance.

Jack's loss of control is a result of his attempt to solve a mystery (the identity of Babette's supplier) that is itself the result of a mystery (Babette's fear of death). Through this two-fold assault, DeLillo forces us to recognize how our participation in crass commercialism has cost us. He hopes to reimburse us by by letting us participate in his own offerings of mystery (and one can select from among many events in the novel--the airborne toxic event, the Dylar experiment, the supermarket shopping sprees), which he attempts to redeem at the end of the novel. The participation he recommends comes in doses, like the dosages of Dylar, and with a similar intent--to get us back to a point where we are not threatened by the mysteries that surround us.<sup>47</sup> In effect, DeLillo hopes to make his readers more sympathetic versions of Old Man Treadwell, who demands his weekly dose of cult mysteries (WN 5). And he does so in a similar vein, affecting us as Old Man Treadwell was affected, by marketing a version of mystery.

This marketing has ideological implications that have not escaped DeLillo's critics. LeClair, for example, argues for their subversive power:

While satirizing how contemporary man uses and is used by his objects, his things, DeLillo also

shows how a new perception of what is now natural-systems among systems, communications, inherent uncertainty, mysteriousness--can accommodate man to his condition as knower and even squeeze a modicum of hope from the junk into which a reductionist way of knowing has historically converted natural complexity. (ITL 229-230)

Commenting on LeClair's reading of DeLillo, Thomas Schaub notes that DeLillo can just as easily be seen as complicit in a capitalist appropriation of postmodernism in which "mystery becomes confused with systemic manipulation" and our attention is "distracted from politically motivated mystery-creation to the (existential) mystery of our being" (Schaub 131). Thus, Schaub answers LeClair: "But mightn't we as easily reply that DeLillo has commodified "mystery"--his popularity and profits, whatever they are, depend on the success with which his fictions coyly insinuate the presence of some reality never finally revealed?" (Schaub 131).

LeClair is far too much an enthusiast of DeLillo's to see him as crass enough to practice the commercial practices about which he writes, while Schaub is too much the political liberal humanist, finding in DeLillo's mystery only "old corruption" obfuscated in a style that prevents "liberation." While DeLillo practices marketing techniques in his presentation of mystery to the degree that he unquestionably reaps some of their advantages, he exaggerates this practice to the extent that it calls attention to itself, so much so that it loses the

clandestine element necessary to make it work well as part of a conspiracy.

For example, consider Jack's assesement of a shopping excursion with Babette:

It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight of and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls-- it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening.  
(WN 20)

Jack's effusiveness is a bit of white noise itself. It mimics the slogans and the repetition of commercials, as it calls attention to itself as a piece of salesmanship. However, despite its own self-conscious excesses, it succeeds in associating consumerism with fullness of being, a connection DeLillo suggests will not go away simply because one calls attention to the conspicuous manner in which it is made. We may know that Day Glo family bargain packs can at best contribute only modestly to our fullness of being, but the audacity of the claim that they can do more is part of their appeal. In fact, the blatant manner in which this claim is made lies behind the practice of "hard sell" advertising, a hard sell DeLillo makes himself when subsequent shopping trips throughout the novel evoke a similar spiritual satisfaction in Jack.

Yet, DeLillo also exposes how "hard" this sell can be when he describes how Old Man Treadwell and his sister Gladys get lost in a shopping mall for four days, "adrift in a landscape of remote and menacing figures" (WN 59), an experience that proves fatal for Gladys. The replenishment Jack purchases from the store can prove brutal for people too old (or old-fashioned) for the impersonality of modern consumerism, people still threatened by the discovery that their fullness of being is located outside of their spiritual being. Of course, this death is also as contrived as the life-giving qualities of Day Glo products. And yet DeLillo is just as heavy-handed in his depiction of the metaphoric death caused by consumerism as he is in his depiction of the life it affords. For example, Murray compares the supermarket to a Tibetan temple: "Here we don't die, we shop. But the difference is less marked than you think" (WN 38).

By exposing the absurdity of marketing extremes, DeLillo ultimately promotes the middle ground of "less marked" difference. His strategy is to over-promote extremes and so explode them by excess. (This is his final appropriation of white noise.) For example, as previously noted, he constantly reinforces the connection between well-being and consumerism and at one point observes, "When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat" (WN 14). When he experiences a personal loss of self-esteem, after a fellow

faculty member, upon seeing him shopping, tells him that without his academic robes and sunglasses he looks like "a big, harmless aging, indistinct sort of guy" (WN 83), Jack goes on a shopping spree. Jack is not alone in his response. Warnings of a severe snowstorm, he observes, bring excited crowds out to the store. DeLillo foregrounds how common purchasing has become as a response to threats both physical and psychological, as if through making purchases one can get a purchase on reality, as if to be is to buy, and one wants a good buy rather than the good-bye of death.

In other words, DeLillo foregrounds his participation in a media circus that exploits the mystery of death. Cantor points out, "By transforming death into a product which is eagerly consumed (the Gladneys never get enough of televised disasters), the media enormously reinforce and heighten the illusion that death happens only to others" (WN 73). In DeLillo's view, this illusion detracts from our humanity while reinforcing the belief that a spiritual purchase has been attained in the act of consumption. Consequently, Jack makes an "economic" denial of the reality of the airborne toxic disaster:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college

professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? (WN 114)

Taken at face value, Jack suggests that the poor are punished for not having the means to purchase spiritual indemnity, with the complementary result that the wealthy are encouraged to look at their sufferings as less-than-human events, as TV experiences, effectively abstracting their reality and reinforcing a commercial mentality.<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, however, the novel demonstrates that you can only buy so much indemnity. DeLillo takes to extremes the discomfiting consequences of participation in the capitalist marketing of mystery. For example, Babette describes her involvement in the Dylar intrigue as "a capitalist transaction" (WN 194). Yet it is a transaction that not only risks her life but her values as well. In effect, it is a transaction that does not allow her to abstract her perspective on death and one that threatens to kill off what she claims to value in life: honesty, fidelity. In a similar vein, DeLillo embarks upon an elaborate pun when he emphasizes that Jack is consumed by thoughts of death. He is in part consumed by it because he has been trained to consume it. As a result, he has become dependent on the prospect of death in order to evaluate life. The effect of this dependency is mirrored in the addictive quality of Dylar--it becomes addictive only as long as you retain symptoms of the problem it is designed to eradicate.

DeLillo sees life and death promoted together in postmodern capitalism to produce lives dependent on death. White Noise literalizes this figurative expression. For example, the Gladney children thrive by giving over parts of their lives to "waves and radiation." Heinrich's sense of self depends on his understanding of himself as the unwitting agent to a systemically infected brain and the complacent pawn to the reality of the media. Denise and Steffie regain their equanimity after the toxic event by volunteering to be victims in a simulated reenactment of it. Heinrich's vitality reaches a pinnacle at the camps set up for evacuees from the toxic event when he becomes the voice of technological authority speaking on the life-threatening nuances of the chemical Nyodene D. DeLillo describes the atmosphere at the camp as "carnavalesque," eerily critiquing the capitalist response that makes an occasion of a disaster.

The examples above suggests a dark side to embracing actively the life dependent on death, but in the world of White Noise, there is no alternative: not only does the commodification of death make one want to participate in death rituals, but it insists on it. In other words, if you do not find it, it finds you. It is like the billowing cloud that seems to hunt the Gladney's down, or the Dylar intrigue that lures Jack into a murder attempt.



The best example of this technological tenacity is in Jack's exposure to Nyodene D. Hoping to determine his risk, Jack consults a SIMUVAC technician who taps into his "history" via the computer and tells him that he is "generating big numbers" (WN 140). (There is of course an irony to Jack's huge "ratings.") These numbers mark the progress of the death that has been introduced into Jack's system. This death is the flip side of the life the bank machine confirmed for him earlier: a computer-authorized death. The technician explains:

"The whole system says it. It's what we call a massive data-base tally. Gladney, J.A.K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time and then I tap into your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. This doesn't mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that." (WN 141)

In effect, Jack's numbers catch up to him. These numbers are located outside of his biological self and so he cannot control them. His predicament is similar to that of Billy Twillig in Ratner's Star, who must learn that his life's work, which he sees as defining who he is, cannot be disassociated from a complex and threatening technological world. While Jack believes that the "massive data-base tally" introduces death into his system, this introduction has been accumulating for years--for example, every time he has gone to the bank machine or interacted with any system.

In the world of White Noise, such involvements are unavoidable. Thus, Jack's lethal exposure could stem from a thousand other sources of white noise, ranging from the TV set to the shopping center.

Since participation in the marketing of death is unavoidable, one's plight is to find his or her best individual marketing strategy. (Recall Jameson's critique of the naturalness of capitalism.) In Jack's case, that strategy would be one that would enable him live through his own death. To varying degrees, he has been attempting to do so his entire life, and the novel suggests that we all do so each day in a technocratic society. For example, Jack does so professionally--he says that he "invented" Hitler studies in a move Murray describes as "masterful, shrewd and stunningly preemptive" (WN 12). Cantor points out, "Jack's appropriation of Hitler follows familiar patterns of capitalist enterprise, including product promotion and consolidation of a territory" (Cantor 44). Jack himself observes, "I filled an opening no one knew existed" (WN 188). Thus, Jack's Hitler strategy is one way of controlling his exposure to death. He takes a figure who through proliferated media exposure became emblematic of death and turns him into a commodity he describes at one point as "fine, solid, dependable" (WN 89).

Jack takes a similar approach in his personal life. Prior to Babette, Jack's wives had all been involved in

espionage. By marrying them, Jack hoped to become privy to the secretive knowledge of conspiracies, that knowledge frequently identified with apocalyptic plots. If he could not glean some control over these plots, he could, at the very least and in a sexist political sense, dominate one who is privy to such information. And even when Jack discovers that this strategy fails him, he devises a new one to "correct" its faults. He marries Babette because he believes that by virtue of her physical amplex she "lack[s] the guile for conspiracies" (WN 5), and he opts for a marriage of "complete disclosure" in which "love helps [him] develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection" (WN 29).

However, despite his careful planning, failures abound. Jack discovers that the complementary end of planning is loss of control. He sums-up this discovery during a lecture to his Advanced Nazism class when he concludes that "all plots tend to move deathward" (WN 26). In other words, they emit a white noise of their own. This conclusion, of course, complements postmodern capitalist ideology, since plots ending in resolutions would thwart the perpetuation of desire.

Jack's inconsistencies are crystallized in his motivations behind cultivating Hitler studies. In a conversation with Murray, Jack comes to understand dual and oppositional motivations for working with a man Murray

describes as "larger than death" (WN 287). Murray elaborates: "On one level you wanted to conceal yourself in Hitler and his works. On another level you wanted to use him to grow in significance and strength . . . You stood out on the one hand and tried to hide on the other" (287-288). Yet in this contradictory way Jack has been the ideal consumer.

In other words, Jack's botched attempts to control his fears are exemplary of postmodern capitalism, which encourages plans that are designed to fail. After all, correction ends consumption. These attempts culminate in Jack's elaborate and confused plan to kill Willie Mink. In its protean nature this attempt is paradigmatic of capitalist marketing. First of all, it covers the extremes of life and death: Jack desires to kill Mink and save his own peace of mind, which he sees as dependent on Mink's death. These extremes are covered again in reverse: killing Mink will also threaten Jack (since Jack intends to take Mink's supply of Dylar), and give solace to the hopelessly Dylar-addicted Mink.

Second, the plan suggests the individual's ancillary relation to the system. Jack sees himself as a servant to his plan, which he envisions as having a life of its own. At one point he confesses to suppressing his own gut instinct to kill Mink quickly because he "didn't want to compromise the plan (WN 311). Finally, the plan changes

each time Jack presents it, responding, as it were, to market forces, and fulfilling Murray's prophesy that death adapts. In fact, the plan adapts to Jack, who by setting out to be what Murray calls all "killer," is trying to control market forces meant to control him. Thus, when he gets shot while trying to execute his plan, it represents both the threat DeLillo sees as inherent in postmodern capitalism and the punishment Jack deserves for trying to exceed his subordinate position to the system.

Throughout the novel, Jack has been depicted as an endearingly hapless sort of guy, with the tacit suggestion that he is not meant to be involved in intrigues; he is not meant to plan. Thus, Jack's failure to realize his plan to be a killer begins his personal growth. In effect, DeLillo wants to market the "execution" of the plan that would have irreversibly sealed Jack's complicity in the system that has been threatening him. Therefore, he undoes its narrative at the point where Jack is the most compromised. After shooting Mink, Jack himself gets shot. This shot serves as the catalyst that turns the narrative around: hoping to steal Mink's supply of Dylar, Jack must instead spit Dylar out of his mouth after trying to resuscitate the wounded Mink; having at first seen his peace of mind as contingent upon Mink's death, Jack now sees his redemption as contingent upon Mink's survival. In effect, having set out

to kill Mink, Jack saves his life. The characters live and the plot itself is the only thing that dies.

In other words, DeLillo advocates replacement narratives that undo themselves, that become their own opposites, and in one sense their own fictions. In this way, planning becomes spontaneity, killing becomes saving, each extreme becomes the other, and in this mysterious union the historic narrative of progress is broken and lives are saved. Since the white noise of postmodern capitalism is so pervasive, DeLillo suggests that these narratives of progress must be executed on multiple levels and on multiple occasions.

In effect, DeLillo hopes to re-market the mysterious area created by the collapse of polar extremes, the area he found claimed by postmodern capitalism, and the area through which he believes capitalism has reached a higher stage of development. In a sense, DeLillo hopes to make the loop of history feedback and choke itself, a process he makes more clear in the "ends" of the novel. DeLillo protracts the ending of White Noise in order to reinforce the image of the multiple levels of participation he sees as necessary to unwind the narratives of capitalist progress. Thus, one can argue that the novel has four endings: Jack's aborted murder attempt, Wilder's race with death across the highway, Jack's description of the chemical sunset, and the Gladney's final shopping excursion. Each ending addresses a threat

that the novel had previously posed, and found could be exploited within the capitalist system, and attempts to undo that threat. For example, DeLillo undoes the narrative of the carnivalesque atmosphere that surrounded the airborne toxic event through Jack's account of the somber crowds silently adjusting to the brilliant sunsets that linger as a result of the cloud's toxic residue.

This readjustment is an example of how DeLillo hopes to summon up narratives that can diffuse the threatening narratives that sustain the postmodern world of white noise. These counter narratives operate between the alleged freedom of the polar extreme of the eternal present, and its continual re-articulation of desire, and the burden of the polar extreme of the eternal past, whose articulation is always reappropriated.<sup>49</sup> DeLillo suggests that there is a necessary interaction between these extremes that makes them seem familiar yet new, a condition he captures in the final image of White Noise: a supermarket in which all the shelves have been rearranged. This image preserves the sense of novelty in the familiar and familiarity in the novel, allowing DeLillo to bring one final set of extremes together and market what to him is a different kind of mystery, that which might result should we ever reclaim the narrative of the postmodern everyday from the grasp of postmodern capitalism.

In Libra, the novel that follows White Noise, DeLillo specifically attempts to reclaim the "radiance of the daily" in postmodernism by examining the history surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He finds the Kennedy assassination paradigmatic of the postmodern experience of history. On the one hand, it has become part of the fabric of contemporary American culture. For example, a popular conception of the American public is that all those alive in 1963 remember what they were doing the moment that they heard that Kennedy was shot. Those not alive at the time, or too young to remember the assassination, can recreate the experience of it through the seemingly endless barrage of books, movies and documentaries that continue to make it a cultural yardstick.

However, this yardstick is a familiar measure to succeeding generations only because it can become remystified each time to which it is referred. In terms of cultural, the Kennedy assassination itself is not as important as the fact that we all know that we all do not know what went on behind it. DeLillo sees the assassination as emblematic of history as white noise: it is part of our daily lore, yet we are unfamiliar with it; and this certainty of uncertainty incites us into continual acts of consumption designed both to alleviate and to perpetuate our uncertainty. In other words, the popular response of the



public to the Kennedy assassination is the prototype response of the subject within postmodern capitalism.

It is no wonder then that DeLillo describes the White House in Libra as "the summit of unknowing" (LB 22). This oxymoronic description of a symbol of authority captures his skepticism about the "heights" to which culture can currently aspire. In fact, in this vein, Libra brings to a head many of the cultural concerns that DeLillo has addressed throughout his career. First, the popular image of the Kennedy administration as Camelot recalls the narrative of the mythic hero, the narrative after which DeLillo modelled his first three novels. And the violent death of John F. Kennedy reminds us of that hero's inability to survive in the world of postmodern capitalism. Second, the fact of the assassination itself is obscured within the various conspiracy theories that have arisen to explain it, reminiscent of the knot DeLillo finds behind the history of mathematics in Ratner's Star. DeLillo suggests that the more we know about a particular history, (and, in Libra, DeLillo devotes a secondary narrative to addressing the complications the CIA's resident historian encounters because he has too much information regarding the assassination), the less certainty we can have about it. Third, this over-informed uncertainty paves the way for capitalist marketing strategies. It is no coincidence that in Libra Lee Oswald is re-christened Lee Harvey Oswald by

the media in order to play a starring role in a narrative over which he never had any control.

Finally, in the face of a totalizing structure, DeLillo offers a narrative of hope. Libra ends with Oswald's mother, Marguerite, insisting that she has a story to tell. Hers is a story of compassion, subjective, and to most ears a fiction poised against the harsh judgement of historic truth. However, DeLillo has spent a career pointing to the mystery behind such truths, and if Marguerite's story is itself a mystery--the vile killer as a loving son--it is an affirmative mystery, reversing the way that within postmodern capitalism truth has made a mystery of compassion.

### Notes

1. Thomas LeClair, In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3. Hereafter cited in the text as ITL.
2. Robert Nadeau, Readings from the New Book of Nature (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 161. Hereafter cited in the text as RNB.
3. Christian K. Messenger, Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 306.
4. Don DeLillo, interview with Thomas LeClair in Anything Can Happen, eds. Thomas LeClair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 86. Hereafter cited in the text as ACH.

5. Don DeLillo, The Names (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 322-323. Hereafter cited in the text as TN. Hereafter, references to DeLillo's work will be given in the text and are to the following editions (the abbreviations used are indicated): AA: Americana (New York: Penguin Books, 1971); RS: Ratner's Star (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); WN: White Noise (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); LB: Libra (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). The original publication date of Ratner's Star is 1976.

6. DeLillo is quoted by Vince Passaro in "Dangerous Don DeLillo," New York Times Magazine 19 May, 1985. Hereafter cited in text as DDD.

7. A.D. Harvey, Literature into History (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 161. Hereafter cited in the text as LH.

8. M.H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp (New York: Norton, 1958), 65. Hereafter cited in the text as ML.

9. Geoffrey Thurley, The Romantic Predicament (New York: St. Martins Press, 1983), 3. Hereafter cited in the text as RP.

10. Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 20.

11. Heidegger's notion of the human being as "Dasein" and Nietzsche's postulations about "metaphoricity" imply individual human agency as a determinant force in the forging of modern culture.

12. Many DeLillo critics have expressed sentiments similar to those of Robert Nadeau, who writes that DeLillo's work is an examination that "expos[es] the principle of the either-or as the most invidious dynamic in the construction of closed systems and symbolics" (RNB 161).

13. John Johnston, "Post-Cinematic Fiction: Film in the Novels of Pynchon, McElroy and DeLillo" New Orleans Review 17, 2 (1990): 94.

14. For example, Peckham discusses "cultural transcendence" at length in the first chapter of Romanticism and Ideology (Greenwood, Florida: Penkeville Publishing Company, 1985).

15. John A. McClure, "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990): 346. Hereafter cited in the text as PR.

16. Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (New York: Pocket books, 1967), 7. Hereafter cited in the text as HD.

17. Gary Storoff, "The Failure of Games in Don DeLillo's End Zone" in Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction, ed. Wiley Lee Umphlett (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 244.

18. See Dana A. Heller's discussion of the quester in her introduction to The Feminization of Quest Romance (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

19. Frank Lentricchia, New Essays on White Noise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2. Hereafter cited in the text as NEWN.

20. In his introduction to New Essays on White Noise, Lentricchia, for example, discusses how the "historical rigor" of DeLillo's novels leads to a vision of cultural density that bespeaks discomfort and political outrage.

21. Austin B. Creel in an article entitled "Contemporary Philosophical Treatment of Karma and Rebirth" in Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments, ed. Ronald W. Neufeldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) notes that following the "karma conferences" of 1976, 1978, and 1980, while thinkers differed on aspects of karma, such as rebirth, one general area of agreement was that by nature "karma is basic" (2).

22. Selvy's spiritual "rebirth" is not an isolated occurrence in DeLillo's corpus. For example, Americana includes a character named Richard Denton who quits his job at the Justice Department Department, changes his name to "Kyrie," and begins walking to California. In White Noise, one of Jack's ex-wives moves to an ashram and becomes Mother Devi. And Mao II begins with a glimpse into one of the character's life in the Unification Church (her life as a "Moonie") during the time of the mass wedding conducted at Yankee Stadium.

23. Not surprisingly, LeClair's optimism about technological systems is shared by many in technical fields. What is striking, however, is the similar unconscious dark side to many of their writings. For example, discussing computers in The New Revolution (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1985) Barrie Sherman writes: "Computers are the ubiquitous technology affecting the citizens of an industrialized country from pre-cradle to the grave" (31).

24. Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 7.

25. If systemic thought presents disunities, its nature proceeds from that presented by the quest literature of the American canon. For example, in The American Novel and its Traditions (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), Robert Chase points out that the protagonists of traditionally canonical works seek not to resolve oppositions but "to discover a putative unity in disunity," to find a place of "rest . . . among irreconcilables" (7). This contention is similar to the strategy of limited mastery Barthelme critiques in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne."

26. Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel of the Nineteen-Sixties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 2. Hereafter cited in the text as BW.

27. In "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," John McClure points out that not only do Selvy's disciplines suggest knighthood but the novel accommodates them: "He is given a position in a secret security force, a boss named Percivel, and a quest" (PR 345).

28. This tension may explain why even critics who see Running Dog as a "postmodern" or "systems" novel take note of its strong sense of focus. For example, John A. McClure calls it a "sustained study" (PR 345) in his article "Postmodern Romance: Don DeLillo and the Age of Conspiracy," and, in In the Loop, Thomas LeClair points out how it maintains the generic codes of the spy thriller (ITL 145).

29. DeLillo ultimately critiques progress as the unifying principle behind capitalism, in this way it overdetermines social reality. For a detailed critical exploration of overdetermination and hegemony, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (London: Verso Books, 1985).

30. I am paraphrasing DeLillo from his interview in Anything Can Happen, p. 87.

31. See Thomas LeClair's discussion of the links between Carroll's book and Ratner's Star in the chapter discussing Ratner's Star in In the Loop.

32. DeLillo discusses polar oppositions a number of times in his interview with Thomas LeClair in Anything Can Happen.

33. For a thorough examination of the mystification of enlightenment see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), pp. xi-xvii, 3-42.

34. Charles Molesworth, "Don DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night," South Atlantic Quarterly 89, 2 (1990), 381.

35. DeLillo's Honduran cartel from Ratner's Star acquires power by continually manipulating the "concept-idea" of money, enacting in satire a potent Marxist critique of postmodern capitalism. For example, in chapter eight of Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, hereafter cited in the text PM), Fredric Jameson argues that consumer pleasure results from consumers' participation in a market ideology designed in such a way that they cannot understand it.

36. I am paraphrasing Michael Valdez Moses's re-articulation of Horkheimer and Adorno found in his article "Lust Removed from Nature" in New Essays on White Noise, ed. Frank Lentricchia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 72. Hereafter cited in the text as Moses.

37. For example, White Noise itself is a return to the examination of market strategies DeLillo first considered in Americana.

38. For an examination of cybernetic principles in fiction, see David Porush, The Soft Machine: Cybernetic Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1985).

39. In this way, the design of White Noise is similar to that of Ratner's Star, a novel DeLillo insists was "to become what it was about" (ACH 86).

40. My description of the postmodern subject paraphrases that provided by Terry Eagleton in "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism" in Against the Grain (London: Verso, 1986), 142-143. Hereafter cited in the text as CMP.

41. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 44-45.

42. In his article entitled "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You" in New Essays on White Noise, ed. Frank Lentricchia (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, hereafter cited in the text as Cantor), Paul Cantor suggests that this state is a pining for "what was authentic in our world and in our culture" made more poignant by the realization that "nothing has changed; things have always been this way" (59). Behind

DeLillo's presentation of this dilemma lies the fear that in the absence of the authentic experience the act of romanticizing will stand in its stead.

43. John Frow, "Notes on White Noise" South Atlantic Quarterly 89, 2 (1990): 415. Hereafter cited in the text as NOWN.

44. DeLillo is quoted by Anthony DeCurtis in "Interview with Don DeLillo" (South Atlantic Quarterly 89, 2 (1990), 301.

45. Moses points to the "seemingly insatiable appetite of Americans for self-help workshops, therapy sessions, and technical training in the quotidian" (LRFN 68) as modern day manifestations of the technological mindset.

46. Thomas Schaub discusses the implications of the "new" natural depicted in DeLillo's work in his essay "Don DeLillo's Systems: 'What Is Now Natural,'" Contemporary Literature, 30, 1 (1989). Hereafter cited in the text as Schaub.

47. LeClair suggests a similar intent in his evaluation of the conclusion of White Noise:

DeLillo . . . shows how a new perception of what is now natural--systems among systems, communications, inherent uncertainty, mysteriousness--can accommodate man to his condition as knower . . . This is the looping accomplishment of White Noise. Morris Berman, in his study of science since the Renaissance, asserts that the effect of systems thinking is a 'reenchantment of the world,' a sense of participation in systemic mysteriousness. Understated and uncertain, the ending of White Noise implies this possibility . . . " (ITL 229-230)

48. Moses notes how Jack can initially ignore the toxic disaster, "since life-threatening disasters, as the televised news represents them, always happen elsewhere, and principally, if not exclusively, affect the poor, not the bourgeoisie" (LRFN 73). He proceeds to relate this psychology to Heidegger's idea of "inauthentic being and its tendency to say 'one dies,' rather than 'I die,'" (LRFN 63) and he points out that Heidegger found this tendency very much reinforced in technological society.

49. Walter Benjamin's notion of "revolutionary nostalgia" proves helpful here. Benjamin looks to the power of active remembrance as it is designed to summon up the traditions of the oppressed against the political present, in effect,

giving oppression a new narrative. My reading draws upon Terry Eagleton's re-articulation of Benjamin in "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism."



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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Richard Anthony Dooner, Jr. was born in New Rochelle, New York, on April 24, 1961. He attended primary school in New Brunswick, Jersey; secondary school in Woodbridge, Virginia; and in 1985 received his Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and philosophy from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Two years later he received his Masters of Arts in English from the same university. In December of 1993, he received his Ph. D. in English from the University of Florida.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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Daniel Cottom, Chair  
Professor of English

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Brandon Kershner  
Professor of English

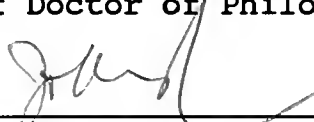
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Professor of English

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Ofelia Schutte  
Associate Professor of  
Philosophy

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dean, Graduate School

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA



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